

Pic Credits:

This image was taken as a screenshot from https://alikazimi.ca/films/narmada/

The article is written by Mihika Bhatnagar, a fourth-year student at the University of Petroleum and Energy Studies on the documentary "Narmada: A Valley Rises" by Ali Kazimi was released in 1994. It chronicles the struggle of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a grassroots movement led by Medha Patkar, to stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in India. The dam would have displaced over 200,000 people, mostly Adivasis (indigenous people), and flooded 1,000 square kilometres of forest and farmland. The documentary shows how the NBA used Gandhian non-violence to protest the dam, and how the Indian government responded with repression and violence. It also explores the environmental and social costs of the dam and argues that it is not in the best interests of the people of the Narmada Valley.

Critical Comment on the Movie, ‘Narmada: A Valley Rises’, what was its impact?

“But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.”[1]

Narmada River (also known as River Reva) is the longest river in the western Indian peninsula and flows within the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujrat and a few regions of Rajasthan. The river originates in a holy tank in the midst of Hindu temples, the Narmada winds its 1,312 km long course to the Arabian Sea through lovely forested hills, rich agricultural plains, and narrow rocky gorges in a series of falls, and rapids. Twists and calm expanse.[2] The Narmada Bachao Andolan [NBM] was started in 1985 after the well-known activist, Medha Patwan visited the valley site where the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam was proposed. The documentary, ‘Narmada: A Valley Rises’ was directed by Ali Kazimi and was released in the year 1994 it showcases the Campaign led by various Adivasi, activists, villagers, environmentalists etc. who came together in order to stop the construction of the dam as the Adivasis are aggrieved by the fact that they need to evacuate their villages as the construction of the dam would result in flooding of their land.

The documentary was majorly shot between the years 1990 to 1993 wherein a series of peaceful protests took place as they were following Mahatma Gandhi’s path. Narmada River, which the people of the valley called ‘mother’, as their whole life revolves around this very river. The two major Tribal communities in the area are- Bhil and Bhilala s by fishing, and small-scale agriculture of jawar, bajra etc. The idea of the movie revolves around showcasing how the government was unable to provide proper replacement means to the people while the officials were offered well-constructed houses and the tribals were not even given basic amenities, thus violating their human rights, however, the main idea of the movie was Protecting Mother Narmada as destroying her would be an interference with the environmental ecology of the region.

---

[1] Rachel Carson, The Silent Springs

[2] Kothari, Ashish, and Rajiv Bhartari. “Narmada Valley Project: Development or Destruction?” Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 19, no. 22/23, 1984, pp. 907–20. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4373303. Accessed 22 Oct. 2022.

The relationship between environment and globalisation has always been complicated and somehow, the environment often falls prey to the hands of developers, and a similar thing happened to the valley of Narmada, which the movie failed to depict. The movie shows a critical violation of the Human Rights of Adivasis, and the cruelty of police and the Indian Government but no one talked about the violation of the Environment. The movie Nowhere shows the Morse Report of 1992 which clearly stated that the construction of the dam would result in a negative impact on the environment and will be a threat to wildlife resulting in major deforestation, which forced the World Bank to abandon its support from providing financial means for constructing the Sardar Sarovar Dam. There were a series of protests all across the world with slogans like, *'World Bank stop funding Sarovar Dam'*. After the World Bank stepped back from funding the dam, the Indian Government still decided to go ahead with the project.

The viewpoint of the documentary is in complete disregard with the idea of development. As per the documentary, the past should be the present. They show how the rural lifestyle of fishing and agriculture is the ideal scenario and perspective of the Dam builders and the idea behind the construction of the dam is not shown properly in order for the viewers to make an informed choice. In the current model of development economic growth has come to mean growth with increasing consumption of energy (and other resources), energy with electricity, and electricity with centralized large-scale generation and grid transmission and distribution (or alliteratively, with fossil fuels). In this setup, the energy consumed by society itself becomes an indicator of its development.[3] This was the idea behind the construction of the Dam which was coupled with the upcoming elections around the country, which made the government desperate to have the dam constructed on a priority basis.

The movie also captures the concept of a clearly distinguishable difference between rich and poor, tradition and progress, and rural and urban. The movie had no proper ending with regard to what was the main impact of all these protests, the movie starts with protests and it ends with protests. It shows how different big officials came to visit and people's hopes were laid on them, but at the end of the day, their hopes got crushed every time.

[3] Shripad Dharmadhikary. "Hydropower from Sardar Sarovar: Need, Justification and Viability." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 28, no. 48, 1993, pp. 2584–88. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400445. Accessed 22 Oct. 2022

'Sarkar Hosh mein Aao', one of their banners said, which is really sad to watch as the government just does not seem to care about either the health of the protestors or the welfare of the Adivasi.

The movie was still ground-breaking at the time it was shot as Medha Patkar, a woman who was shown as the hero of the lives of those Adivasi people, and she had so much impact showcasing how women were capable of bringing change. It also showed the impact of other women in the movement which was a big deal back then.

The movie constantly captures the beauty of the Narmada Valley and how the environment is what makes people what they are. It shows how people's lives revolve around the environment, the environment which we so carelessly pollute and try to mould just to fulfil our ways. Development and environmental protection were supposed to go hand in hand, not one being in complete disregard for the other. In pursuit of the urban lifestyle of big buildings, and shopping complexes, we often forget how peaceful life was when we completely disrupted the environment, which is sad, and the movie perfectly captures this very concept.

The movie could have been more complete in its way if it would have shown a proper background behind the movie and a brief introduction should have been given regarding the environmental complexities which would happen if the Dam is constructed. The plight of people was shown very nicely and this movie also captured how helpless people feel by the same people they give their valuable votes to.

The movie leaves us with a question in our mind, who are we without our environment? Probably nothing.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.