

The Gendered Geography of Par-Purna Adivasi Sangathan in South Gujarat

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Introduction

*Jaan Denge Jamin Nahi!*¹

*Gam ni Jamin Gamni Sarkar ni Nahi!*²

Chanting these slogans, hundreds of small farmers -- women, men, and children -- from the “Mahuva movement” carrying banners and flags and wearing bandanas that proclaim *Jal, Jamin, Jungle Bacho*³ embark on a 350 kilometer *padyatra*⁴ in Saurashtra, Gujarat to protest the construction of Nirma corporation’s cement factory amidst the reservoirs that irrigate their fields.

Hundreds of kilometers to the northwest in Kutch, Gujarat, at an environmental public hearing, scores of fishers⁵ from the *Macchimar Adhikar Sangharsh Samiti* (Committee for the Struggle for Fishers’ Rights, henceforth MASS) challenge the environment impact assessment of the power plant to be built by the Om Prakash Group, a private corporation.

In South Gujarat, *adivasi* (original inhabitants or indigenous) youth from the *Nar Par Adivasi Sangathan* (Organization of Adivasis from Nar Par Rivers, henceforth Sangathan) stop four technicians -- subcontracted by the

¹ We will give our lives but not our land!

² The village land belongs to the village, not the government

³ Protect our Water, Land, and Jungles

⁴ march, literally, pad, foot yatra, pilgrimage

⁵ Subramanian (2009) first articulated this gender-neutral term to refer to both fisher women and men.

government to conduct field surveys in preparation for constructing dams --
and bring them in to a people's court.

These ongoing struggles of *adivasis*, fishers, and farmers, have led to substantial victories against the state's neoliberal development project in one of the most developed states in the country.⁶ With constant vigilance, the Sangathan in South Gujarat has prevented the state from undertaking the field surveys necessary to begin construction of the dams. The Mahuva movement in Saurashtra has been able to move the Supreme Court of India and the Green Tribunal of the national Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) to order the dismantling of the cement factory. In Kutch, although MASS has been unable to stop the construction of the power plant it was successful in demanding a change in the plant's technology from a water-cooled system to an air-cooled one, the first time that a subaltern struggle has been able to achieve such a change. While more expensive, this technology is less destructive of fishers' livelihoods and the environment. Gujarat is an important case to examine as both in India and abroad it is a flashpoint around two issues, both attributed to its then charismatic Chief Minister, now Prime Minister, Narendra Modi: the success story of development and the massacre of Muslims in 2002. Yet, neither of these captures the failures of development or the successes of subaltern

⁶ Neoliberal development, often referred to as liberalization in India, is characterized by privatization and the increasing role of the market and declining role of the state in economic and social development. Yet, the state has retained an important role in selling common property resources, especially land, at highly subsidized rates to private corporations, becoming a "land broker state" (Levien 2014). I discuss in greater detail the particular character of neoliberalism in India and in Gujarat in Chapter One.

struggles. This paper and the book based on the struggles are a contribution in that direction.⁷

My main argument is that these movements succeeded because of the changing relationship between the state, social movements, and democracy in India, or the deepening of democracy albeit in tandem with the increasing coercive powers of the state. But they also demonstrate the ways in which gender remains a challenge for the state and subaltern movements and call into question the extent of democratic deepening. In this paper, I will focus on the gendered geography of the Par-Purna Adivasi Sangathan in South Gujarat.

Context of Struggles

The ongoing “reinvention” of state-society relations in post colonial India, Corbridge and Harris (2000) argued, is being shaped by contradictory political processes of “elite revolts” against state intervention and subaltern politics that demand a state response to their oppression and exclusion from development. Subaltern politics, in the form of grassroots

⁷ The paper and the book are based on two seasons of field research: the first from January to November 2011, was funded by the Fulbright Hays Faculty Research Abroad Fellowship, and the second from October-November 2013. My field research involved commuting between the sites of the three struggles. I spent roughly three months in the villages in each site. I also spent several weeks in Ahmedabad, the largest city and the node of the translocal field of protest and close to the state capital of Gandhinagar.

based new social movements (Omvedt 1993), beginning in the late 1960s contributed to this changing political terrain in two ways. First by influencing changes in the state's legal architecture and second through the emergence of translocal fields of protest.

Thus, the public interest litigation initiated by the Supreme Court in the 1980s, the Panchayati Raj Act of 1993, and its effect on other legislations such as the mandatory public hearing amendment to the Environment Protection Act of 1986 as well as on mobilizing a movement that resulted in the Right to Information Act of 2005, provided opportunities for "legalism from below," key to the success of all three struggles. Defined by Eckert (2006:45) as the ways in which subaltern groups use "legal terms against the transgressions of law by state agents and other bodies of governmental authority," legalism from below has become a dominant part of the contemporary protest repertoire of many subaltern social movements in India. From gaining information via the Right to Information Act, itself a result of collective mobilization, to participating in environmental public hearings and filing public interest litigation, the struggles engage in a form of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006). Thus, contrary to the "legal fetishism" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) of the neoliberal age, the collective and critical nature of legalisms from below transforms law from abstractions to what Mulqueen and Tatrny (2012) call "law as ontology," in the process challenging and extending the very conception of legal categories.

Simultaneously, earlier subaltern politics, specifically the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Struggle to Save the Narmada, henceforth NBA),⁸ also contributed to, what I call, a *translocal field of protest*, comprised of ongoing relationships among multiple, local fields of protests. From the beginning each struggle was constituted by and contributed to this translocal field. Based on a call of, *vikas joyeh, vinash nahi* (we want development, not destruction),⁹ the struggles not only supported each other, but also engaged in more ongoing work of mobilizing and sharing collective, critical practices, thus creating and sustaining a translocal field of protest.

Many of the same players, such as cause lawyers, journalists, academics, activists, and advocates were active in the three struggles, operating in the same arenas such as the courts, the streets, NGOs, research centers, and subaltern communities (Jasper 2013). This I argue is a reflection of the changing character of subaltern protest under neoliberalism, which has not only generated the dispossession of subaltern groups but also consolidated linkages among movement actors. These linkages are facilitated not only because of newer technologies, but also by understanding the struggles as a response to the same neoliberal logic, which must be countered by articulating with other struggles. These translocal solidarities were also crucial to their success.

⁸ The Narmada Bachao Andolan emerged in the mid-1980s to protest the construction of over 100 dams along the river Narmada and its tributaries. Its transnational mobilization resulted in the World Bank withdrawing its funding for the project in 1993. The Indian state, however, continued without the funding and most of the dams were completed in the 2000s. The movement still continues as the National Alliance of People's Movements, to protest ongoing dispossession of subaltern groups in India (Baviskar 1995, Nilsen 2010).

⁹ This slogan itself has crossed over from the NBA and is heard in almost all contemporary movements against dispossession throughout India (Baviskar 1995, Levien 2013, Nilsen 2010).

The three struggles not only protested their dispossession from the land, they also engaged in alternative development practices such as establishing producer companies and cooperatives to address their economic deprivations, and participated in collective dialogues, workshops, and trainings to further their political empowerment. In the process, they are also reviving Gandhi's *gram swaraj* (village self-rule) as a homegrown alternative model of development. These struggles thus challenge several arguments about subaltern protests against development. One, articulated by Levien (2013), among others, sees the subaltern politics of dispossession, or land wars, as ad-hoc, single-issue, and occurring in an organizational void. The other suggests that subaltern protests represent a form of neoliberal governmentality and rights based claims are an indication of shrinking space for transformative politics (e.g., Chatterjee 2010, Ray and Katzenstein 2005). Finally, some analysts see subaltern protests as alternatives to development that are autonomous from the state and based on indigenous cosmovisions (e.g., Escobar 2008).

Yet, these struggles also reveal, what I call, a *gendered geography of struggle*. Influenced by nearly four decades of women's movements and women's empowerment projects of the state, subaltern women are active in large numbers in all three struggles. Yet, they are visible and audible in only some spaces of the struggles and in those sometimes more so than subaltern men. Contrary to expectations, they appear most prominently in the public spaces of *yatras* (marches) and *jan sunwais* (public hearings), or meetings with public officials, but are marginalized in the private, decision-making spaces of the

struggles. Furthermore, each struggle engages in a gender division of political labor whereby gender work -- understood as mobilizing women and women's issues, men are not considered as gendered -- is done by women's movement organizations (WMOs) in the area and not within the struggle.

Nonetheless, these struggles, along with many others currently underway in Gujarat and across the country, challenge the monolithic narrative of vibrant Gujarat, or India Shining promoted by Prime Minister Modi, and embraced by the elite and middle classes and demonstrate the changing relationship between the state, social movements, and democracy.

A Spontaneously Assembled People's Court

After lunch on a hot April day in 2011, Sujatabenⁱ, Kashinathbhai, and I were sitting on a swing in the verandah of the Khadki *ashram*ⁱⁱ school's guesthouse, by the river Nar, when her mobile phone rang. As she followed up that call with a couple of others, the long verandah became a hive of activity. A couple of the ashram school children swept the floor and spread a yellow plastic tarp on the floor for people to sit on. About six beige, molded plastic chairs were arranged in a semi-circle near the swing and in front of the tarp. Sujataben told us that some villagers had apprehended four non-*adivasi* men collecting water samples from the river and were bringing them to the school. Soon *adivasi* men began to assemble on the tarp. Just as I was mentally noting the absence of women, a group of about ten women came and joined the men on the tarp.

Shortly, the four non-advansi men, visibly shaken and confused, were escorted onto the verandah. Sujataben invited them to sit on the chairs and offered them water to drink, a common gesture of hospitality. Kashinathbhai, after greeting them, asked them who they are and why they were collecting water samples. One of the four men spoke on behalf of the others. He said they were from a company called Excel Environ Solutions in Surat, a city about 100 kms away, and had been subcontracted by the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), to collect water samples from rivers with currently existing dams. Before he could continue, the villagers accused them of lying saying they were digging and collecting soil samples, which were now in their Jeep. Kashinathbhai asked to see their list and after examining it told the four men that the list did not say anything about existing dams and was nothing more than a map with names of villages.

Then he and Sujataben proceeded to tell the four men about the opposition of villagers to the proposed dams, the yatra they had undertaken in January, and the pledge they had all taken at the river in Chasmandva to never allow the construction of any of the dams, even if it meant giving up their lives. As Sujataben was describing the difficult hilly terrain of the area, one of the four men said, “while we were driving around here I was telling my colleague how hard it must be to live here.” Even before he finished speaking, a woman responded angrily, “we are happy to be living here, this is our land, we work hard on it.” The young man was startled at the woman’s response to what he thought was a sympathetic comment.

Sujataben then handed them a folder she had preparedⁱⁱⁱ about the protests to the proposed dams, the yatra, their petitions to the NWDA and, most importantly, signed copies of the unanimous resolutions and formal votes passed by the *gram panchayats* in opposition to the construction of the dams. She then told them that the community wanted them to spill the samples they had collected and to tell their supervisor why they were prevented from collecting the samples by the people's struggle against the proposed dams.

The man who had emerged as the spokesperson then expressed his admiration for the people's struggle. He said, like them, he too was a villager and understood their connection to their land and hoped that their struggle would be successful. The villagers denounced his support and insisted that in addition to the water samples they should also leave behind the soil samples in the Jeep. He swore that the soil samples were not from the area but from another project they had been working on in Maharashtra. The adivasis were not convinced. They called him a liar and surrounded the foursome as they get up to leave. Sujataben had to intervene to allow them to spill the water sample and get into their vehicle. Several adivasi youth got into the Jeep to escort them out of the area and hitch a ride back to their villages.

This spontaneously organized people's court illustrates the rhythm of subaltern struggles where such spontaneous events mark otherwise quiescent periods. It also provides a glimpse of the gendered geography in the Sangathan. Adivasi women heard about the court and came unbeckoned, not only to bear witness but also to challenge the outsiders' perception of their lives. It is through such self-assertion that they have challenged their

unwitting exclusion at various points in the struggle, as I demonstrate below. I argue that this gendered geography in the Sangathan is a reflection of their movement anchor, the Trust, and its work, which did not address gender inequality, as well as its relationship with the local field of protest. The local field of protest is composed primarily of NGOs that provide services to the adivasis rather than work with the communities to address issues of inequality within them. Nonetheless, adivasi women's collective experiences of working on development projects in the past as well as their histories of greater mobility and freedom than caste Hindu women have enabled them to assert themselves as I show below. I begin, however, by providing a context within which to understand their struggle and assertion.

Legalism from Below and Translocal Solidarities

In the Sangathan, legalism from below consisted of petitioning the National Water Development Board's office in Valsad to get information on the surveys being conducted, who would be impacted, the and compensation and rehabilitation plans for the villagers. All the petitioners were male, community leaders. Filing petitions involve a learning curve and this learning occurred collectively in meetings composed mostly of male adivasi leaders, Sujataben, and Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti activists. Such ongoing translocal solidarities were key to the Sangathan's struggle. As McFarlane (2009) notes what is important in such translocal relationships is the labor and materiality of processes that contribute to such relationships.

While translocal solidarities facilitated gaining legal information, they did not challenge the absence of women from the process of writing petitions or in the various meetings

that were held in the Trust offices to prepare the petitions. When I asked about this exclusion, activists highlighted the gendered division of labor that they claimed prevented women from being available to participate in such activities. Kashinathbhai was one of the few adivasi leaders who saw the exclusion of women from such processes as problematic and the need for the Sangathan to address it.

Similarly, even as the village campaigns and meetings call for active participation of all adivasis, adivasi women were often not included. Ansuyaben, an adivasi activist and leader, told me how the initial meetings only included men. When she and other women found out about these meetings they had to confront the adivasi men for excluding them. She told them “if we are all to speak in one voice, then why are we not included? When they began to hold meetings for women as well, so many of us began to come that there was no place for all of us to sit ” (Interview April 10, 2011). Yet, she noted how the meetings continued to be in the evenings when it is not convenient for them as most have just returned from the farms and have to prepare the evening meal. Despite this, in all the villages women continued to attend meetings and make their voices heard. Ansuyaben did so in a particularly telling way when she composed the song for the yatra.

In a similar vein, several adivasi youth, discussed the need for an effective means of communication. Being spread out among seventy-five villages over hilly terrain with inadequate transportation does not lend itself to easy communication or mobilization. Inspired by the women’s *mandals* (groups) that were formed in many villages by both state and non-state development projects over the years, they decided to form a youth

mandal. Another source of inspiration was the state's recent introduction of an emergency service and a phone number, 108, to access this service. Since many of them have mobile phones, they set up a network they called 208. They collected the mobile phone numbers of youth involved in the Sangathan and shared it with each other and activists in the struggle. Ironically, while inspired by women's groups they did not include young girls in this network, which did not go unobserved by adivasi women.

But adivasi women challenged such exclusions in various ways including through composing songs for the yatra.

Challenging Exclusion

Par Bai (woman from Par river)...Nar Bai (woman from Nar river)...

We will not let you build a dam in Paikhed village

We were born here, our land is here, we will not leave it

We will not let you build a dam on Nar river

Nar bai.-Par bai....

We are residents here how can we go to a far away country?

No one should try and forcibly move us from here

Nar bai - Par bai...

Women's Strength Organization is not afraid

Whatever happens we are ready to fight

Nar bai-Par bai...

If a big official comes here

We will give him a strong answer

Nar bai-Par bai...

- Ansuya Padvi

(A sister who will be impacted by Paikhed Dam)

Starting from the chorus and the very first line, the song is grounded in the lives of women who live on the rivers Nar and Par and their opposition to the construction of the Paikhed dam. It then establishes their claims to the lands and river based on birth, residency, and national identity. As the song notes: we were born here, our land is here, we live and work here so how can we go to a far away country? Thus being moved away from their land is tantamount to being sent to a foreign country. Although many adivasis routinely migrate for employment to towns of Gujarat and Maharashtra, they return every monsoon to work in their fields.

The song both establishes that land is as much women's issue even though women's right to land are not addressed by the struggle even as it identifies the strength of the women's organization that will resist any attempt to move them, especially coercive ones. The women's organization that Ansuyaben is referring to no longer exists but was formed almost two decades earlier under a project of the Bharatiya (Indian) Agro-Industries Foundation (BAIF). BAIF was started in 1967 by a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi to promote sustainable rural livelihood through natural resource management, including watershed development, agro-horti-forestry, and goat husbandry as income generation activities (www.baif.org.in). In the 1980s, when women became the targets of many governmental and non-governmental development programs, BAIF too began to focus on

women's empowerment and ecological sustainability. It was at this time that they began to work in the Dharampur area in 1982.

Alluding to a women's organization from decades ago reminds everyone of women's strength and is a rebuke of the current struggle for relying on women yet not including them in meetings. They consistently challenged the Sangathan leaders for excluding them and twenty-seven women from Khapatia, Ansuyaben's village, participated in the yatra for three days. They also challenged their exclusion from the 208 network. In the absence of a WMO in the area, it was up to the women to assert themselves.

Thus, as others have noted (e.g, Sharma 2010), women's participation in state and non-state development projects, no matter how disciplining, market driven, and short-term, leaves behind traces of empowerment that subaltern women draw upon, even decades later, to assert themselves.

Towards a Gender Just Development and Democracy

In challenging their exclusions adivasi women draw upon a variety of sources, including their participation in NGO-run development projects. And they continue their activism through participation in translocal struggles such as those organized by the Adivasi Ekta Manch (Forum of Adivasi Unity), a statewide adivasi organization. When I returned in 2013, their struggle had been quiet as there was no activity on the dam front. But they knew of the struggle in Rampipla, in North Gujarat, against tourist development that would displace adivasis near the Sardar Sarovar Dam, about 250 kms away from them.

They had gone there to join in the padyatra protesting that development. Due to the rains, however, the padyatra was cancelled but the rally was held and Ansuyaben along with other adivasi activists spoke at the rally and sang a song she had composed for the occasion.

“Adivasis let’s organize and fight this obstacle.

Jungle mother, land mother, neither is ours now,

Adivasis let’s organize and fight this obstacle.

She also told them how the women in her area had challenged the men who excluded them at first but once we began coming to the meetings, the men had “no class” against us women. She noted how in the Narmada district the women were not as organized as they were.

Such a gendered geography is partly a result of the Trust’s focus on providing services such as health, education, roof tiles, and subsidized grains but not on women’s issues per se. In addition to the Trust, the field of protest in Dharampur consists of Christian missionary organizations, Shrimad Rajchandra ashram -- whose primary focus is to serve as a meditation and religious retreat for Jains from all around the world, but it also engages in some welfare activities for the adivasis -- development NGOs such as Action Research in Community Health and Development (ARCH) that like the Trust are involved in reform activities, primarily focused on health and rural development, and the Dharampur branch of Astitiva, a WMO based in Valsad that primarily focuses on violence against women. So while all the NGOs include women in their work, with the exception of Astitiva none of them focus on women or gender issues in their work.

Thus, the ideology and work of the Trust, reinforced by the local field of protest in Dharampur, has shaped a reformist activism that reproduces gendered geographies in the struggle, leaving it to adivasi women to assert themselves.

The struggle thus highlights the fault lines of gender and reminds us that without specific attention to gender inequalities, the task of democratizing democracy within struggles and in society remains incomplete.

ⁱ Sujataben is a Gandhian activist who runs the Khadki ashram school and related projects of the Trust. Kashinathbhai is an adivasi elder and activist in the Sanghathan. The Nar Par river area is on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra and the language spoken by most adivasis is a mix of Gujarati and Marathi.

ⁱⁱ Ashram, or spiritual retreat, schools are usually state run boarding schools for adivasi children. This one along with another in Pinvad is run by the Trust.

ⁱⁱⁱ She had on hand several copies of this folder for such unanticipated events.