

FILM REVIEWS

A Narmada Diary

BY ANAND PATWARDHAN AND SIMANTINI DHURU

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COLOR. 1995, 60 MINUTES/COLOR

A *Narmada Diary* tells the story of Indian villager resistance to the enormous Sardar Sarovar dam project. The film comes largely from documentary videos shot between 1990 and 1993 by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the Save Narmada Movement). The Narmada Bachao Andolan represents the indigenous Adavasi people of the Narmada valley, who are being forced to evacuate their homes as the dam floods their land. The partial successes and ultimate failures of the movement are documented in a continuing struggle with international agencies and Indian government officials intent on completing construction of the dam regardless of the human consequences.

The film focuses on a series of protests mounted by villagers and the Narmada Bachao Andolan against the continuation of the dam project. Local women and men stage marches to the site of the dam, as well as to major cities such as Bombay and Delhi. Employing tactics of passive resistance, demonstrators provoke police and dam officials to harsh threats and, on several occa-

sions, to violence. Such confrontations serve to increase the notoriety of the opposition movement. In 1992, the scope and depth of villager protests forced the World Bank to abandon support of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

Indian government officials, however, continue dam construction even without international assistance. The film chronicles the increasing desperation of the protesters as they attempt to save their villages from flooding. Adavasis refuse to leave their homes, claiming that they will drown before being resettled to government camps, where they must sleep in common barracks without any land of their own. Police eventually forcibly remove the villagers. Medha Patkar, one of the leaders of the movement, initiates a hunger strike in central Bombay in an attempt to draw attention to the plight of her followers. Government promises of a review of the project, issued in order to end the hunger strike and other protests, are never realized. In one particularly poignant scene, Patkar and other leaders consider whether to throw themselves in the river and drown to protest the dam. Despite their efforts, however, dam construction continues.

The film establishes two sharply contrasting visions of India's future. The viewpoint of the dam builders is shown through 1950s government-sponsored black-and-white films that proclaim dams the "new temples of modern India." Electricity represents progress; traditional methods of land usage in India must give way to speed and technology. Use of these old video clips allows the filmmakers to portray this view as outdated. The creators of *A Narmada Diary* constantly criticize industrial megaprojects as remnants of a less caring, more wasteful era that must be ended. Instead, they advocate the ancient, traditional lifestyle of the Adavasis, suggesting that fishing and small-scale farming could be the "model for an intelligent world." The old has become new; the grandiose dreams of the industrial age threaten to destroy India, and only a return to the past can save the country.

This film explores a number of issues appropriate for either high school or college classrooms. The issue of development versus the environment is universal. The film also offers other interesting points for discussion. The role of Medha Patkar and other women as prominent leaders in the resistance demonstrates evolving gender roles in India. The power of the protests, and their ultimate defeat by government forces, show both the mobilization of the population and the extent to which the state will go to stop such movements. Other subjects the film touches upon deal with such eternal struggles as rich versus poor, rural versus urban, and tradition versus progress. Students need not have any special knowledge of India to understand the debates as they are presented in the film. ■

JEFF SAHADEO is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of Illinois. His research is focused on European colonialism in Central and Southeast Asia. He served as the teaching assistant to "The Civilization of India" course at the University of Illinois.

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THE GANDHI MEMORIAL CENTER

P.O. Box 9515
Washington, D.C. 20016
Phone: (301) 229-3871
Website: www.self-rev-gandhi.org
Email: gandhimc@erols.com

