compelling argument for a mode of engaging with representations of traumatic memory, including testimonies, in ways that can account for their subjective and rhetorical dimensions.


"we shall drown, but we shall not move"

the ecologics of testimony

in nba documentaries

bishnupriya ghosh

We have lived here for twenty generations. The land is not only for us but for ants and insects and cattle and birds and trees and gods and demons—for all of us together.

The anonymous speaker iterates a mantra against the Indian postcolonial state. He lives in Domkhedi, one of the many villages slated for submergence by the coming of large dams. He represents the countless dam-affected—the relocated, the displaced, and the drowned out—in India’s Narmada river valley for the past three decades. He speaks of an “ecologic,” the logic of oikos (or the household), of dwelling in an interconnected system (oikonomia or economy) of human and nonhuman relations. He offers such logic as a polemic against developmental projects undertaken by the state that provide compensation only for the loss of property—if that. The speaker intimates the losses go further, deeper. Some may be tabulated (land, home, cattle, crops), but others remain incalculable (forest, water, community, generational memory, religious practice). Together they provide the basis for the testimonies that I scrutinize here.
These testimonies materialize in multiple media, but I shall focus on a particularly vivid instance: their audiovisual capture in a series of documentaries made in solidarity with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Save the Narmada Struggle), a thirty year social movement launched against the Indian state (the federal government), regional governments (of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan), corporatons (the German Siemens, the American Ogden Energy Group, and the Japanese ODA, to name a few), and institutions of global governance (such as the World Bank). The movement seeks to curtail the single largest river valley hydro-irrigation project in India, involving the building of 30 major dams, 135 medium, and 3000 minor dams along the 820-mile Narmada River in western India, which spans four states. Construction on one of the largest dams, the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) that has evoked virulent opposition, began as early as 1961, but the project gathered speed as late as 1985 when the World Bank agreed to fund it. Proponents of the project argue the dams would bring irrigation, electricity, and drinking water to vast populations. According to government estimates 152,000 people would be affected by the project, 37,000 of them indigenous peoples or adivasis; most other agencies, together with NBA documentarians, put the count of the dam-affected closer to 400,000.

The “NBA docs” (as I shall call them) shot on film and video have played a robust role in garnering global legibility for a series of heterogeneous struggles in the river valley involving heterogeneous actors with multiple grievances, demands, and agendas: K.P. Sashi and Ratna Mathur's A Valley Refuses to Die (India, 1988), Ali Kazimi's Narmada: A Valley Rises (Canada, 1994), Simantini Dhuru and Anant Patwardhan's The Narmada Diary (India, 1995), Jharna Jhaveri and Anurag Singh's Kaise Jee le Re' (How Shall We Survive, India, 1997), Sanjay Kak's Words on Water (India, 2002), and Franny Armstrong's Drowned Out (Britain, 2002), along with two shorter videos, Aravinda Pillamarri's I Will Report Honestly (India, 1999) and Leena Pendharkar's autobiographical essay My Narmada Diary (US, 2002). The documentaries range in their focus from preoccupations with deep ecology (in the Sashi/Mathur film) to shooting one long encounter between the NBA and the state (Kazimi's footage of an early face-off, December to January 1990). Despite the range, however, they share a significant political aesthetic that I shall develop in this chapter.

Deeply archival, the NBA docs assemble institutional archives (government-sponsored newsreels, engineering plans, budgets, public policy documents) as a spectral backcloth to testimonies from dam-affected indigenous communities; overtly activist, they seek to represent “public interest” against the state, echoing the NBA's challenge to national and regional governing bodies. Their solidarity with the NBA is evident in the collaborative nature of these productions. One notices the same filmmakers, crew, and consultants cropping up in several documentaries: for example, Ali Kazimi (Narmada: A Valley Rises) is a consultant on Dhuru/Patwardhan's Narmada Diary, Jharna Javeri (Kaise Jee le Re') on Sanjay Kak's Words on Water and Kazimi's Narmada, Simantini Dhuru on the Jhaveri/Singh, Sashi/Mathur, and Kazimi films; Patwardhan's cameraperson Ranjan Palit is the photographer for Kaz's documentary. Other journalists, activists, and scholars who have documented the movement in print media (Chittaroopa Palit, Amita Baviskar, and Sanjay Sangvai) also variously appear in the credit sequences, testifying to a large informal network of collaborators engaged in a common project.

A second collaboration between the documentarians and those who testify in the films tells us something more about the nature of this archive. The longest testimonial is garnered from established adivasi witnesses and activists such as Bhola Mundiya, Dedlibai, and Luhariya Sankariya. The most eloquent local spokespeople are repeatedly chosen to convey the “public interest” of disenfranchised populations. Their agenda is to affect audiences to move them to solidarity. So the best translators in the business—those who, politicized by loss, can tell stories well. Those who argue well—are employed to take on this Herculean task. Clearly the gathering of testimony here is not intended as a legal archive where numbers matter; rather, the testimonials work alongside voice-over narration to translate degrees and modalities of loss for target audiences in India and abroad.

Figure 2.1
Luhariya Sankariya testing Franny Armstrong's camera (photo by Franny Armstrong, courtesy of www.spannerfilms.net)
have now displaced millions who have lost their homes and livelihoods to rising waters bearing promise of irrigation, drinking water, and electricity. Large dams in India have displaced 16-38 million, while the Three Gorges project in the Yangtze River Valley has uprooted 10 million. In the past three decades, 1534 dams have been built in India alone. Hence these decades have seen strong responses from both those who govern (institutions and leaders) and those who are governed (dam-affected populations). The World Commission on Dams now encourages dam construction as the last alternative, and only when it is “economically viable, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable,” while popular opposition has come from “people who have not moved”—who vow “never to move.”

Not all these environmental justice struggles signify as “green.” In the Indian case scholars have shown how the state responds to similar incidents of police brutality against environmental activists depending on the degree to which a struggle is globally legible. An encounter between activists and the police in the Maheswar anti-dam struggle of the NBA in 1998, Anam Baisak writes, received a very different response from the Indian state than the one involving the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) mobilized around ethnicity, distributive justice, and local commons in the Nimar plains of Madhya Pradesh. Not only were the perpetrators of police violence not held accountable in the AMS incident, but also the state resorted to different tactics in each case. To the NBA they offered redress in the name of saama (equal and respectful treatment), while in the Nimar plains area they engaged in saama (buying out) and bhed (inciting differences) among indigenous populations. The different responses reveal the kind of social capital garnered by these different environmentalisms, a capital garnered, as scholars such as social historian Ramachandra Guha have argued, by the NBA’s success in linking local actors to North-based environmental networks for advocacy, money, and media coverage.

Yet the NBA’s legibility has dismayed many. The presence of NGO benevolence prompts new suspicions of dependency: organizing resistance to dams, activists worry, can serve to defuse political anger turning folks into dependent victims. NGOs are not, after all, wholly free from governmental processes and procedures of governance, Upendra Basi reminds us; they therefore transform the modes of social action undertaken by those who stand to lose most and possess organizational power into the hands of intermediaries. Others criticize the mythopoetic capture in national and global media of a rapidly morphing movement—for example, the eternal dyad of activist Medha Patkar and “her” adivasi. The NBA has changed immensely since its first local stance—“the dam will not be built.” From local resistance it has moved to a formal critique of large dams, to a broader inquiry into accepted models of development and, more recently, multiple engagements against privatization. But the cost of global legibility has been the fixity of the first moment in the public imagination, now a static iconic image of the movement.

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“they have drowned our gods”

If mobility conjures perhaps the most significant feature of contemporary globalization, Gayatri Spivak cautions us to remember “people who have not moved”—Fourth World or indigenous peoples—whose lives are nevertheless radically disrupted by their insertion into systems of transnational exchange. The story of big dams is one story of the global South in which indigenous communities become central protagonists: key to large-scale developmental projects, big dams in India, Ghana, Kenya, China, and Brazil
These are but a few of the litany of criticisms leveled against the NBA. No doubt they cast a shadow on the cultural work of the NBA docs, key media for forging global linkages. So how may we understand the NBA docs’ political agendas in the face of such criticism? After all, the NBA docs are in the business of making the NBA legible: that is, both recognizable and legitimate. Legibility leads us into a more complex consideration of the question.

Legibility immediately invokes the materiality of documentary practice—those institutions, practices, and networks constitutive of documentary as activism. We might consider production values, formats (film, video, and digital), media technologies, and exhibition venues (audiences ranging from small-town India to international film festivals) to parse the garnering of legibility. Some of the NBA documentarians have strong allegiances to flourishing collectives (such as Media Storm, the Janamayam Cieds Collective, the Raaj Media Collective), participating in a “parallel and secondary structure” for production, distribution, and exhibition of the sort Charles Wolfe describes in the case of the American documentary collectives. NGOs, foundations, social interest groups, and privately raised monies fund many of the NBA docs, not the state-run Films Division that had long sponsored information and propaganda films; many of the filmmakers work on a flexible small scale, doing most of the camerawork and editing themselves; debates erupt over subtitling, screening venues, and the packages of traveling film shorts; and the filmmakers often travel to local (village or small-town) venues to translate (sometimes literally) their films for local audiences. More significantly, the NBA docs directly target heterogeneous “global audiences” consisting of both lay audiences who may be self-conscious viewers of “global cinemas” (screened at film festivals, art cinema, or small screen local theaters) and self-reflexive documentary publics with some exposure to social change documentaries (screened at festivals and conferences). The subtitles and intertitles are telling in this regard: local measures such as quintals or sher, for example, are translated into kilograms or liters, while monetary transactions are transcribed to dollar amounts. Clearly transnational (English-speaking, literate) audiences are crucial for funds and advocacy, and the NBA docs undoubtedly seek to “sell” the movement to transnational audiences.

While these questions of circulation, exhibition, and distribution are central to any consideration of the NBA’s politics, in looking at testimony, my primary emphasis in this chapter falls on legibility in its second resonance: a cognitive framework. Many of the NBA documentarians, most famously Anant Patwardhan, who claims, “my style of documentary filming is simple—you just film the truth,” self-consciously position their utterances as transparent captures of events. History happens; the camera snaps it up. Yet, these are finely crafted, even poetic, texts positioning the people who will not move as heroic figures who make good the promise of democracy. So we are tempted to ask: what kind of frameworks do we find in these documentaries? How do they encourage us to read testimony in specific ways?

“you have come to take our pictures? what will you do for us?”

The famous words from an irritated interviewee in Anant Patwardhan’s early film on Mumbai Bombay, Our City (1985) highlights the documentary problematic: to what extent do documents such as these bring about social change? Do they in fact, as Jane Gaines has asked, spur audiences to action? If they do, the answer seems to lie in the NBA docs’ generation of spectators’ empathy for the losses encountered by the dam-affected. Despite their self-acknowledged straightforward style, these documentaries deploy the veiling effects of voice-over expositions, of high contrast editing, of distinctive camera movements and angles, and of post-production sound.

To a large extent, the filmmaker remains at a pedagogic distance from the indigenous subject—evident in Sanjay Kak’s expository invocation to his adivasi subjects to take back “your land, your forests, your river” (my emphasis)—aligning these films and videos with the oeuvres of documentary collectives who saw their productions as part of a larger social movement. Most notable among eco-docs of this kind is the work of the Ogawa Pro, a group of filmmakers (led by Ogawa Shinshuke) formed in 1968 to document the long struggle of Sanrizuka farmers against the building of Narita airport in Sanrizuka; by 1970 the Sanrizuka struggle had become a magnet for anti-war and student movements. Taking the environment as a catalyst for critiques of the state, the work of the collective was inspired by the famous Sanrizuka documentaries (beginning in 1966), whose aesthetics of direct cinema (the handheld shots, the loud jumble of noise, shaky close-ups, and disrupted frames) resonate with the NBA documentaries. We see this on several occasions for example, in Dhuru/Patwardhan, when the NBA activists attempt to speak to World Bank representatives (Mumbai, 1993), as the filmmaker engages in a fracas the handheld camera slides, we lose both focus and frame, and our only guide becomes the noise of a scuffle and loud argument on the audio-track along with an explanation in post-production voice-over; just after, intertitles tell us that while the film crew were engaged with NBA leaders demanding entry, the police were beating up the NBA activists outside in the absence of the camera. At such moments, the making of the film becomes an event in the NBA mobilization.

Further, the NBA docs have an episodic structure, those famous “mosaics” of direct cinema. The narrative moves from crisis to crisis: Dhuru, Patwardhan, Kazimi, and Kak, in particular, present encounter after encounter in a loose episodic telling of NBA resistance to multiple actors. Where the episodes in the Sanrizuka documentaries are held together by
a musicality, as Abe Mark Nornes has suggested, the NBA docs suture the episodes—the countless protests and numerous testimonials—slightly differently, through a poetic cartography. Throughout the documentaries we return to the river Narmada as a continuous stabilizing arena: sequences shot on the river consolidate the disparate settings of the narrative action (the villages of Manibeli, Domkhedi, Jasindhi, Mokhd, Baragi, and so forth), while the voice-over narration spatially organizes these shooting locations as “further up along the Narmada,” “on its west bank,” or “where the Narmada enters Gujarat.” In some of the NBA docs (notably, the Sashi/ Mathur film, but also in Jhaveri/Singh), the cartography, history, and mythologies of the river cast adwaits losses in a historical frame.

More importantly, the insertion of an idyllic “unbound” river at regular narrative intervals heightens the spectator’s sense of loss. The composition of episodes taking place at the resettlement camps are in stark contrast to the lush views of the river; close-ups of rusting machinery (partially obscuring the frame of a shot), the cluttered mise-en-scène of ramshackle huts, the pans over an arid parched earth are juxtaposed with the panoramic shots of the Narmada, which have considerable depth of field and are habitually interspersed with medium close-ups of trickling/lapping water or verdant foliage (reminiscent of nature docs). The audio-track for the river shots largely offers diegetic sound—lapping, trickling, quiet sounds of human activity on the river, the rustle of leaves as the filmmaker (with a handheld camera) makes his or her way around the banks; in contrast, the track for the resettlement camps registers camera static (unedited in post-production) combined with a pedantic voice-over on where we are or whom we shall meet.

Such careful aesthetics not only heighten the spectatorial affect suturing the spectator to the river as a place of repose, but also crystallize “our” relation to river ecology (humans, plants, water). Like the haptic cinema of the Sanrizuka documentaries, where the camera was sometimes “planted” in the mud to immerse us in the earth tilled by the insurgent farmers, the NBA docs work at emplacing us “in” the river, “in” the forest. The handheld camera rushing close to plants and the water, often in extreme close-ups, already offers pleasures beyond the cognitive—kinesthetic pleasures of moving in this landscape. We spend much time moving on the river from village to village, the rocking motion becoming haptic grammar as we progress. The filmmakers facilitate further immersion by turning up the volume of the natural world: a lapping becomes louder until it surrounds us. If we remember sound requires matter to make its way to its destination (our bodies), then such audio supplements the visual perspective in sensorial ways. The combination of the cognitive, kinesthetic, and sensate, as Laura Marks has argued, renders the river intimate, a living breathing organism coextensive with us, a system whose logic, constantly explained in the testimonials, begins to govern our grasp of the political matters at hand.

Several sequences illustrate this haptic dimension, an exemplary instance occurring thirty minutes into Sanjay Kak’s Words on Water where we come upon two men winnowing grain in the middle of a soon-to-be-submerged field. The sequence is shot at low angle, with a full shot of both men at a diagonal (with one closer to us than the other) swinging a cloth filled with grain between them. The edge of the cloth reaches right up to the camera, out-of-focus as a blur of showering grain hits the lens. Lulled by the swinging motions of the rich harvest, we are caught in motion and lulled by the repetitive chik-chik of falling grain as the figure closest to us fades into rack focus before the dissolve. A similar sequence in Jhaveri/Singh’s Kase Jeebo Re! plunges us into the rhythms of the adwais world, only this time with fishermen caught in silhouette as they fling their nets onto the river (the shimmer of net, like the grain, shot in close-up) and with ferrymen whose oars we habitually follow into the river. In such immersive cinema, the spectator “shares” the consciousness of the adwais whose story of social, economic, ecological loss and consequent politicization the documentaries attempt to tell. The documentaries ensure political mimesis by spectatorial sensuous dwelling (oskos) within an ecosystem (eikonamos).

"we will die and live on this land"

But who are these subjects we glimpse, who stand to lose this world? More importantly, how do they speak to us in these documentaries? The memorable concluding shot to the sequence I have analyzed in Dhuru/Patwardhan’s Narmada Diary provides a point of departure. The bucolic sequence closes with a full shot of a ferryman (an envoy of the downstream dam-affected) silhouetted against the river. A romanticized, indeterminate cutout against the sky, he visually straddles river and sky, embedded in the ecological world the film discloses to us. Such a figure, a heroic visual figuration representative of those “who will not move,” often concludes a litany of other subjects engaged in various social and economic activities on the river—a child playing in the mud, a farmer, a woman washing clothes, women bathing, and so forth. The romanticized subaltern who “dwells” on the Narmada is the ecologically lodged subject par excellence, recorded in populist vein, one who “stands in for” various others who testify to a disrupted ecology (the relations between humans and other living organisms) along the river with the coming of the dams. In the age of constant motility, evident in the geography of camps visualized in these documents (arid land, ramshackle tin huts, close-ups of rusted pumps, tractors, or hoses), the ecologically lodged subjects living on the banks of the great river seem utterly “placed” in the documentary imagination recuperating the logic of dwelling in this balanced economy of organisms. Such immersion in the adwais world turns subaltern object into homely pans, one whose losses move us in this populist cinema.
Yet such a romantic figure is a far cry from the heterogeneous dam-affected whose testimonies we hear throughout the documentaries. Official estimates of PAP ("project affected peoples") are 245 villages or 40,000 families numbering 85,000; the NBA puts it at 60,000 families numbering 400,000, including downstream dam-affected communities. The dam-affected range from farmers (both rich patidar crop farmers to adivasi subsistence farmers) who have not been compensated or have been inadequately compensated for their land; to downstream communities (fisherfolk, jerrymen, healers, sand quarry workers, among others, dependent on the Narmada embankment forests for their livelihood); to those who acquiesced to resettlement but find themselves in resettlement camps for 10–20 years (the earliest camps were set up in 1982); to others who move back to their drowned out lands to escape slow decline at the camps. Many of the dam-affected hardly fit the category of the subaltern visible to the state only when violently insurgent; many are highly articulate in their testimony. Several adivasi actors are visible to the state, registering discontent and demands in a litany of lawsuits and petitions; their exchanges with state representatives (politicians, bureaucrats, and the police) are often mediated via a network of activist leaders, translators, media representatives, lawyers, students, and NGO members. More truly subaltern are two other groups: one comprises the disaffected camp-dwellers whose testimonials are carefully collected as primary documents, the other those who have not moved away but relocated to higher ground, eked out a living on scant means, whose daily brutalization fuels insurgency. It is their testimony—loss and subsequent dehumanization—that gathers moral force in these works of solidarity.

Scholars explain that a large percentage of the subalterns in the NBA docs are adivasis. In Amita Baviskar's excellent scholarly study of resistance to the NBA, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, the history of the NBA becomes part of a larger struggle for "tribal rights," which has now culminated in the passing of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers' Act in the Indian Parliament, 2006.68 The NBA docs carefully document the different communities (the Bhils, Gonds, Bhillas, and Baigyas) that are officially ethnicized, the Jhaveri/Singh film interviewing locals who explicitly refer to resettled adivasi as "savages" (who only know how to eat and drink and who barely cover their bodies). If Baviskar's NBA history renders subalterns legible by framing them as ethnically defined subjects, Arun Agrawal's Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects (2005) makes legible a more heterogeneous conglomerate of actors—political ecologists who work on the commons, environmental justice advocates, and deep ecologists—for whom the environment is "a domain in conscious relation to which they organize their actions." 69

The NBA documentaries also present the adivasi as "environmental subjects," but rather differently from these scholarly works. The adivasi becomes representative spokesperson, victim politicized into activism; all the documentaries introduce the adivasi as those who have lost the most. Several adivasies speak of a harmonious economy (the production of pulses, sorghum, millet, maize, oilseed, lemons, tendu leaves, gums, fruits, and mahua flowers; of folk medicines; of fish harvesting) “before” the dams; others insist on an ethics of compensation, angered at being offered land wrested from other adivasi communities; and still others intimate a desire for a commons. Besides these aspirations, the dam-affected record grievances: not only failed legal entitlements, but failed rehabilitation (e.g. bad water at the camps destroying cattle, goats, and sheep) and unacceptable compensation (e.g. rocky land with silt poured over it). Most often the documentaries focus on loss—the full calculus of goats, cattle, yields, forests, crops, acres, household goods lost to rising waters—alongside documenting adivasi social ecology (dances, myths, stories, and poems) and the popular artwork of the NBA (songs, posters, and effigies). Ceremonies, family histories, and rituals (such as the funeral of an activist to which all those in solidarity are invited) also become events in the life of the NBA. So, though initially the camera eye lingering on face decoration or folk dances, or intruding upon grief, may appear quasi-anthropological, we begin to realize the documentaries choose their subjects only if they have some connection to the NBA. For example, at the close of the Narmada Diary, after a year of satyagraha ("civil disobedience"), we see why the documentary began with a traditional Holi dance spectacle; by 1994 the traditional event...
had been transformed into a political one, the dance now interspersed with the burning of effigies.

The record of everyday rhythms only intensifies our sense of the losses accruing to the dam-affected. The documentaries meticulously catalog the everyday intimacies of the river world that the abstract dream of development will disrupt. The river bank sequences are replete with everyday activity: *parikrama* (praying at the river), washing dishes or clothes, carrying drinking water, bathing, sand quarrying, ferrying boats, sweeping huts, making *chapatis*, milking cows, tilling fields, brushing teeth from toothbrushes fashioned from branches, splicing tree-trunks for medicine ... the list is endless. The litany underscores the extent of the losses the *adivasis* will undergo, given their use of common space, forest, and water resources. As the ever articulate Luhariya Sankariya insists:

Here we get things without money—fodder, fuel, wood for housing. In resettlement everything needs money, therefore we must make loans and we are trapped in a cash economy. We have never had to migrate for work—everything we need is here."

But with the coming of dams, those *adivasis* who are least integrated into systems of exchange stand to lose "everything." The descriptive axis of the documentary supports the stature of their loss by recording a vital relationship between the river world and, a relation with its own logic. Such an emphasis on the relations between human and nonhuman worlds moves beyond the otherwise mythic claims of origin—"we have a right to dwell here" or "the forest belonged to our forefathers." Ecology offers a grammar of collective ownership parallel to that of individual property rights.

"I have nothing more to say" 60

The documentaries make it clear that despite mobilization, despite dying for a cause, those who have lost most by the coming of the dams remain subaltern, since their "speech" is lost in bureaucratic white noise or amid the din of state-sponsored pro-dam protests. And when *adivasi* demands are audible (writs filed, petitions submitted) they fade into obscurity with the passing of years. The highest court in the land fails to uphold the right to moral dwelling (implicit in the ecologic) as a juridical right (the Supreme Court lifted the ban on dam-building in 2000). Such suggestion intimates that subalternity persists—hence the right to disruption persists. The narrative logic of the documentaries leads us to frame insurgency as set in motion by the state, the fitting response to dehumanization.

Scholars, activists, and observers often suggest the root of the problem lies not only with the ideologies of development and an unwieldy bureaucracy, but with the languages of legal entitlements, rehabilitation and resettlement, and compensation. Neera Chandhoke, a long-time associate of the NBA, explains that it is not that the *adivasis* are incapable of self-representation, but that they do not have access to these specialized languages, illustrating her observation with an evocative story:

[A] revenue official surveying land holdings in the valley for the purposes of assessing the amount of compensation asked a tribal about his land holdings. The tribal pointing towards an area of land claimed proprietorship of that land. Expectedly he was asked to show the relevant papers that establish land ownership—the *patta* [deed]. Equally expectedly, the tribal did not possess any such *patta*. "How do you know in this case that the land is yours?" asked the revenue official. "The bones of my forefathers are buried along the boundaries of the land," answered the tribal. 61

Since such evidence cannot count toward a legal claim, the revenue official leaves without a record of the *adivasis* as deserving of resettlement. And one could multiply these examples. Another observer, Clifton Rozario, reiterates the dissonance of translating the *adivasis* view of loss (alighting once more on Luhariya Sankariya's case) in his careful parsing of the various bodies through which each voice travels: voiced grievances (sometimes directly tabulated, and sometimes in songs and myths) are transcribed into writ petitions and affidavits, then framed by a court case letter (with advocates selecting appropriate "facts") before submission to a judge who, in turn, will choose to hear only what is relevant.

It is in this context of failed transmission that the interviews of the dam-affected in the documentaries assume the force of testimony. All of the documentaries deliberately juxtapose the official record of the Narmada Valley Project with the popular view consolidated through testimony. Official views range from news excerpts from Doordarshan (the state-run television network), 62 government-funded advertisements for the dam (on television and in posters or banners), interviews with pro-dam activists, party workers, and state officials, to close-ups of documents and reports; Sanjay Kak films a museum dedicated to "tribal life" and the river ecology that has already frozen what will soon become historical artifact with the coming of the dams.

Clearly the NBA documentaries seek to create an audiovisual record as public archive against possible erasure. Within the documentaries, this agenda is most evident in the documentarians' self-styling as witnesses who compensate for the severe lack of coverage of *adivasis* grievances and aspirations in mainstream media. Kak self-reflexively underscores the participation of the filmmaker as an appropriate response to the "time-scale that the crises of the environment seem to demand"; 64 Dhuru and Patwardhan acknowledge their participatory role in naming their
documentary a "video diary." At several points in the documentaries, if unobtrusively, we are made aware of the presence of the filmmakers by their voice dimly caught on the camera's mike, or by the gesture of the interviewee left unedited in the documentary. In The Narmada Diary, a man who speaks of his drowned home brusquely turns away from the camera, suddenly impatient, muttering "I have nothing more to say"; at a later point, just as the camera focuses on a group of women laughing at someone who had slipped on the muddy riverbank, one woman humorously performs her activism for the filmmaker by the words, "We will slip, but we won't shift." Such self-reflexive moments position the documentarian as witness caught in complex social relations, and not as an objective reporter. Some of the interviewees demand such witnessing: "You listen to our voice," insists Baba Bhai early in the Sashi/Mathur film, "we will die and live on this land," while Kaise jeeke Re! closes with people standing chest deep in water, insisting the educated remain attentive to "our plight" so it may not be that of others.

"i know how my heart feels"

Although the primary imperative of the NBA docs is to capture the anti-dam mobilization, they are clearly interested in recording and figuring loss. Even apart from fragmentary snatches speaking of loss, all the documentaries consolidate several full-ledged testimonies, numbering anywhere from 7-8 (in Dhuru/Patwardhan and Kak) to as many as 15 (in Jhaveri/Singh). Testimonies are taken at village meetings which inform and mobilize; at rallies and protests; at the resettlement camps; on drowned out riverbanks (most commonly); and, occasionally, to record physical death (in the voices of the bereaved) or injury. Sashi/Mathur dedicate their film to Gangaram Keluda, who lost his life to the Subarnarekha Dam Project, while the Jhaveri/Singh film closes dramatically with adhuan chest deep in water who speak of their "exit" from the world, their fragile presence in the now as ghosts. The tenor of the testimonies varies according to their site. For example, Dhuru/Patwardhan begin The Narmada Diary with the testimony of a woman, hands tied by Gandhian veteran Baba Amte to signal nonviolence, at the center of a crowd of protesters and police. Angrily she exhorts the police "to fire on us now," and not "drown us later," moving on to assert her right to dwell in the Satpura range that belonged to "our forefathers." Assuming a collective voice, this trenchant, fiery declaration is fairly representative of testimonies gathered at protests, a sharp contrast to the more emotional testimonials of loss at the riverbank. I will focus on the latter at some length because they are the most affective, intended as they are to move us; but let me pause briefly on the two other genres before I do.

Establishing shots of the camp, with close-ups of dry arid land and rusting machinery, often frame testimonies taken at the resettlement camps. Interviewees are mostly placed inside their temporary dwellings, sometimes caught in humdrum activities (eating dinner or preparing food) and sometimes more formally facing the camera as the filmmakers trot out questions. Many such testimonies carefully and intricately tabulate grievances: a man from Mokhdi village who lives in a camp recounts the five acres of unusable land he received from the government, before taking Kak on a tour of the camp where others speak of the lack of fodder, contaminated groundwater, dry wells, the death of cattle, and lack of food. Armstrong's film captures Bhugabai Thakys' nine-member family displaced by the Bargi dam living in a slum, who have used up the meager cash compensation they were given for their 14-acre farm; once subsistence farmers, her daughter and son-in-law now join the millions of manual laborers in the cities who work as bricklayers or rickshaw-pullers. "I know how my heart feels," says Bhugabai to Armstrong. "And I don't even die!"

The third variant comprises testimonies at meetings where politicized adhuan speak to their comrades about their loss. Armstrong shoots Luhariya from his left, flanked by other activists, as he speaks of his losses but also his targets, goals, and plans at a meeting before the Jalsindhi satyagraha of 2000: "The country does not belong to the government exclusively," Armstrong's subtitles of Luhariya's speech tell us. "It also belongs to the adhuan, it belongs to everyone." A sequence of shots clearly frames Luhariya's testimony as democracy in action, as his speech is crosscut with three to four zooms to demonstrators in procession while police wait, batons in hand. Such testimonies at meetings are shot at medium range, with signature unobtrusive camerawork; perhaps the testimonies at the protests most reveal the presence of the camera as the handheld device is jostled in the crowd, sometimes sliding away from the interviewee as the filmmaker seeks to regain his or her balance. Together these testimonies, full of myriad detail, have a cumulative effect on the spectator overcome by a general sense of loss.

The sense of loss is keenest in the river testimonies that claim the lion's share of screen time in the documentaries (even as they vary in frequency and duration). They are often anticipated by the kind of immersive takes I have discussed already. About twenty-eight minutes into the Dhuru/Patwardhan film, there is a three-minute testimony from a woman whose land has been drowned out when the dammed waters rise at Manibeli village during the monsoons. Just before we get to the testimony, there is an extreme close-up of an oar in the river as the filmmakers appear by boat; as the boat arrives, a naked child stares at the camera. The camera slowly takes in the mud and moves close up to a destroyed hut, as the roar of the wind fills the soundtrack. This spectatorial emplacing is followed by a cut to a medium close-up of the woman, with a naked child peering into the frame of her hut on the right. Sounds of everyday activity—voices far down the bank, a broom brushing leaves, the creak of pails—register on the soundtrack as the woman bewails their decision to stay despite government warnings.
"We have lost everything," she says, pointing to the river before looking away and wiping away a tear with the pallu of her sari. The camera modestly focuses on the child staring at the mother, before cutting to the river as its roar is amplified on the soundtrack.

Armstrong’s documentary abounds in voiced testimony overlaying shots of the river, bank, fields, and homes. Forty-two minutes into the film, a voice bewails the drowning of gods as the camera pans over the bank and cuts briefly to a woman framed by the river behind her; as she continues to speak, we are in motion through high green stalks that rustle on the soundtrack until we are down to the river and the camera focuses on the muddy bank. Then we cut to extreme close-ups of the river, water splashing against the shore as the woman’s voice continues to “narrate” losses. The voices link the spectator immersed in the river world to the speaker, establishing a sound bridge between images of the nonhuman (river, forest, and embankment) and human (activities on the river) worlds. The testimonies that follow describe losses that have become embodied knowledge for the spectator already immersed in the river world—a double wound heightening the pathos of the river testimonies.

Such an emphasis on voice is furthered by the NBA docs’ critique of the visual apparatus. The filmmakers reiterate the state’s blind hubris—a list of miscalculations, oversight, and mismanagement—in staging invisible losses in a distinctive audiovisual language. On several occasions, when a subject points to drowned out homes or property, the camera (zooming in. zooming out, panning or tilting) focuses on the rising waters but appears unable to capture or locate what lies beneath, what has been lost. Rather, we depend on the testimonial voice to replace in imagination what is now invisible. Twenty-seven minutes into Dhuru/Patwardhan’s film, a man testifies to the loss of his home, land, and cattle to the rising waters during the 1993 monsoons. Once more in medium close-up, he is on higher ground with the great Sardar Sarovar Dam lying in full view behind him. “See that land jutting out,” he says. “There ... there.” He reiterates with frustration, pointing his finger beyond the dam. The camera follows the indexical gesture, zooming in to where his home once had been—but of course the zoom helplessly falters, it pans and tilts in an effort to locate the exact spot amid a great swathe of water. What is indexed is lost, and the gesture only gives the loss the charge of the phantom real. The helpless slow zoom at such moments contrasts sharply with the fast zoom out (iteratively used by Dhuru/Patwardhan, Kak, and Armstrong) to capture the magnificence of the dam: a close-up of gushing waters at the dam is often followed by an abrupt zoom out that reveals the width of the monster as a shock. But in the river testimonies, the zoom fails. Giving up, the camera moves back to the subject’s face that speaks of “my home, my belongings, fields, cattle ... these are the only clothes I have,” before turning away with irritation (“that’s all I have to say”). The testimony ends here with a cut to an extreme close-up of an oar dipping in the river.

Such disjunction where the zoom fails to follow the indexical gesture is repeated in the river testimonies of the other documentaries. The disjunction between what we see and what we are told, between the visual and the audio, opens up the gap between a before and after of development, reiterated at other points by the omniscient voice-over narration. “By the time you see this film,” we hear Patwardhan expostulate, “these villages will be gone.” The spectator will have arrived too late. Now immersed in this ecology, he or she will experience the losses suffered by the subaltern subject. The disavowal of the visual reverberates as a critique of the state: one village, for instance, refused to let the state government “survey” the land, map and document it, since this act usually began the processes of land acquisition. The oral testimonial assumes primacy in an audiovisual text whose visual style unabashedly seeks to garner empathy.

“here we get things without money”

The dams disrupt the adwaits’ homeliness. The river turns into a commodity, redistributed to metropolitan and richer rural grounds; now de-naturalized, the Narmada confronts the subaltern in alien, even threatening, form. An “old friend turns foe,” recounts Armstrong, while Kak ruminates in a melancholic vein on how “something familiar turns against you.” The melancholia is deeper in these later documentaries (both made in 2002) in the aftermath of the submerging of many villages by then. The loss of the river moves centrifugally to finally represent the loss of life itself.
The majority of adivasis insist they might as well have died (drowned, shot, or starved to death), since the state obviously perceives them as sacrificial objects. Disposable peoples, these are dehumanized unhomely subjects of the nation; in protest they disrupt the time and space of the nation-state.

How do the NBA docs frame these disruptions of the state’s designs? What are their political potentials, given their goal of garnering global legibility? Here political scientist Partha Chatterjee’s reflections on the politics of the governed are extremely instructive. Chatterjee has long argued a will to governance marks those who are privileged members of civil society, given to regulating state power. If, as I have intimated, these documentaries play a key role as linking mechanisms that render local struggles globally legible as “liberal green,” in Lawrence Buell’s words, they clearly call for proper governance. To a large extent, the NBA docs recognize forms of struggle that fit the idea of a liberal democracy made good by civil encounters, including nonviolent “civil disobedience” (sathyagraha). All actions by subalterns against the Narmada Valley Project—be they part of the movement or not—are consolidated in the NBA docs as signs of democracy, with nonviolent sathyagraha commanding most screen time. The icons of the movement (most centrally Medha Patkar and Baba Amte) speak of the vitality of Indian democracy, while an army of translators submits wits and petitions; anger only erupts as vocal protest amid meetings or demonstrations. Kazimi’s voice-over shots of NBA marchers’ dusty feet tell us they are “following in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi,” historical civil disobedience instantly consolidating heterogeneous protests, marches, and demonstrations under the rubric of a national movement. The naris (slogans) and speeches—such as Patkar insisting the entire country would back the dam-affected if only they knew their water had the blood of the dam-affected in it (Narmada Diary, 1995)—streamline the struggle into a national popular movement, smoothing over differences within the movement (different degrees of loss, different idioms of representation).

For those populations that have historically never participated in the modern associational forms constitutive of civil society, but who nevertheless have a political relationship with the state (the “governed,” in Chatterjee’s terms, “looked after and controlled by various government agencies” [38]), responses to the state might be quite differently conceived. They may not be nonviolent; they may consist of contingent negotiations on behalf of small groups not working in solidarity; and they may consist of demands for temporary relief or recompense based on moral, and not civil, rights. While the documentaries no doubt participate in the liberal dream of a revitalized state kept in check by a global civil society, it would be a mistake to undercut their solidarity with the “governed” daily engaged in a political society. The constant shifting compromise between the normative values of modernity (democracy gained through civil actions) and the “moral assertion of popular demands” in these documentaries testifies to such solidarity. Kazimi’s documentary explicitly underscores such labor, the initial exposition framing what we see not just as mobilization for civil rights, but further as a “moral struggle at the heart of the valley.” This moral right to dwelling is most evident in the documentaries’ ability to move the spectator into an ecologic where the adivasis’ relation to land, trees, river, gods, and demons is not just the mythic imagination of the noble savage. Rather, the political aesthetic of the documentaries works to emplace the spectator as ecological subject, one who begins to dwell in the world to be lost captured on camera and therefore inhabits the ecologic governing subaltern action. Such moral solidarity productively complicates the work of cultural translation these documentaries undertake as they participate in the NBA; they attempt to move the spectator to the political nimesis Jane Gaines has theorized in social change documentaries. Following Tom Waugh, we might read these texts as utopian practice instead of instrumental projects; social change documentaries such as these not only move audiences to read resistance (violent and nonviolent) as the logical and legitimate response to a violent state, but they further impart the moral attributes of community to hitherto amorphous “populations” not legible as publics.

Most importantly perhaps, the documentaries disclose the plans of the dam-affected. They remain heterogeneous hopes, targets, and goals; they speak of microclimates, local demands, and contingent solutions. They are in fact the uneven negotiations of the governed, now turning their sudden access to media technologies into tactical encounters with the state.
 Documentary becomes solidarity with a "political society" that does not
square with the overarching "civil" consensus the NBA exemplifies. Rather
direct, even angry, outbursts from the dam-affected chafe against the
(often) poetic melancholia of the voice-over narration. Some interviewees
present well-calibrated tabulations of costs (exact yields from mango trees
to sorghum), others offer pragmatic schemes the state might have adopted
in lieu of this grandiose design.

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citizenship; and Andrea Fontenot for her editorial suggestions.

Notes

1. Anonymous testimonial from Domkhedi, 2000. Cited in Paul Routledge,
"Voices of the Damned: Discursive Resistance against Erasure in the

2. Ecologie was one of the neologisms coined by Ernst Haackel, a disciple of
Darwin, in 1865. A term derived from the Greek ekos, referring originally to
family household and its operations, for Haackel ecologie referred to "living
organisms of the earth [that] constitute a single economic unit resembling a
household or family dwelling." (Donald Worster, Nature's Economy: A History
of Ecological Ideas, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Such a
conception moves against more romantic separations of dwelling from
property, as William Cronon's breakaway short book Changes in the Land

3. The first stirrings of active struggle began in 1978, but these turned into a
palpable social movement in 1985 when the charismatic Medha Patkar, a
social scientist from Tata Institute of Studies in Bombay, started working for
mobilization against the submergence zone in the villages of Maharashtra.

Parkar's urban contacts drew media attention first, and then the participa-
tion of city-based nongovernmental organizations, which began dissemin-
ating news of the struggle in briefings, newsletters, and films. Lobbying
legislators, collecting funds, and organizing solidarity events to keep the
NBA in the news. The efforts on the part of North-based NGOs pressuring
international funding agencies to withdraw aid met with substantial success
in 1992, when the World Bank withdrew its support for the SSP in 1993.

The terms means "original inhabitants." etymologically quite different from
the official categories that register these indigenous groups as Scheduled Tribes.
One of the best elaborations on the term can be found in David Hardiman's
The Coming of the Devi: Advasis Assertion in Western India (Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 1987).

The states attached to each title (for instance, "India" or "Canada") only
document the source of financing: the film crews, however, are almost
drawn always from multiple locations.

The NBA challenged the Indian state's aggrandizing of land under the
1894 Land Acquisition Act (which allows the state to annex land based on
"public interest") on the grounds that the latter had failed to act in the
"public interest."

A note on my shorthand for these documentaries: I transcribe collabora-
tions as "Dhuru/Patwardhan" to intimate a joint enterprise rather than
either/or; the placing of the names is alphabetically arranged, except in the
Sashi/Mathur case, where Sashi is listed as director and Mathur as editor
(yet the documentary is often classified under both names: see www.

The footage of May 1993 protests (in which several NBA activists sustained
injuries, and one youth was shot) in Patwardhan's documentary recurs in
Armstrong's text, while Sanjay Kak's footage of a dispute at the Maheswar
dam site (2000) is later recycled as a video installation in an exhibit,
"Building Sights." on urban space hosted by the Raqs Media Collective
("India Now" festival, London, June 2007). The documentaries therefore
become one public archive of popular resistance to large developmental
projects (dams, "clean city" drives, real estate schemes).

These are not legal documents necessarily, although some of the filmed
grievances have been subsequently used as archival records: in 2000 the
NBA included eyewitness accounts in their report to the International
Labour Organization.

In Franny Armstrong and Sanjay Kak's NBA does, but also Clifton Rozario's
"... Bolti Band" ("... Silent"), Sarai Reader 2005: Bare Acts (www.sarai.net/

Angana Chatterjee tracks the writer he has filed as a petitioner in the NBA
(1994 and 2002) to bring this case before the courts. See "India Together:

In Luhariya's allegations against the state, he echoes what Andrew Dobson
has recently described as "ecological citizenship," where the "footprint,"
rather than contiguous territory, should determine obligations and duties.
Andrew Dobson. Citizenship and the Environment (London: Oxford University

Partha Chatterjee, Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most
17. Before this period, the government had spent $1.5 billion on large and medium-sized irrigation dams between 1951 and 1980; yet, as Shiva catalogs, the yield of water (1.27 tons per hectare) has been pretty low (Shiva, Water War, 62–3).
19. Amita Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).
20. In India, the “encounter” is common parlance for police brutality with intent to eradicate.
21. The AMS (or the Organization for Tribal Liberation) is a grassroots conglomerate of activists and adivasis.
24. “Legible,” in the strictest lexical sense, denotes a composition “plain enough to read.” From the Latin root, legere, the word migrated to Middle English to imply two different modalities relevant to our conversation here. First, the materiality of signification: that is, to be legible requires decipherment, requires accessibility. This may be narrowly construed as technological: to hear or see something, with the primary emphasis falling on vision. The second involves cognition.
26. Most of the NBA docs are funded by individuals, environmental groups, or independent media organizations from India; a few are funded or co-funded by agencies in Britain, Canada, and the United States.
27. For instance, Anurag Singh does camera for Kaise Jeeta Re!, while further editing, and directing, the film with collaborator Jharna Jhaveri. Ali Kazimi is cinematographer, writer, director, and narrator on Narmada.
28. Franny Armstrong’s concluding shot juxtaposes intertitles, updating her global audiences about recent turns in the NBA’s fortunes, with full shots of happy children singing one of the NBA’s songs in a jivan shala (the schools set up as part of the movement’s agenda of local sustainability)—the children an obvious staple for marking the developing world.
31. See Mark Nornes’ elaboration of the microstructures in the Santrzuela documentaries in Abé Mark Nornes, Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinuke and the Postwar Japanese Documentary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
32. Laura Marks, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
33. Baba Bhai’s testimonial in the Sashi/Mathur film.
36. The draft bill aims to compensate the “historical injustice” done to forest-dwelling tribes that were denied their traditional rights to forests and resources in the last couple of hundred years. See Ashish Kotari and Neema Pathak, “Forest and Tribal Rights.” Frontline, 21 May–3 June 2007.
38. The claims to the commons are variously stated, the forests appearing as both regular resource and backup for hard times: one woman in the Jhaveri Singh film tells us that in times of drought the forests still yield nutritious sweetened roots that can sustain adivasi families whose crops fail.
39. Bhola, interviewed in Armstrong’s Downed Out, tabulates twelve generations from memory to illustrate the centrality of social ecology to family genealogies in the village of Jalshindi.
43. Bhutto and Patwardhan further juxtapose a 1993 news segment with a segment from a 1950s newsreel (“A Village Smiles”), where the voice of God narration actually quotes Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous view that “dams are the temples of modern India.”
45. Bughabai to Franny Armstrong in Downed Out.
46. Before this sequence, we focus on Rahman’s parents who are still building a hut for him even after his death with the coming of the Bargi dam.
48. These notations foreground the unhomeliness as the structure of feeling, as Spivak maintains, of planctarity—an invisible system of relations deeply other to human exchange. Gayatri Spivak, Death of a Discipline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
49. Buell poses liberal green against the more radical propensities of ecologism or deep ecology as the philosophical framework for thinking environmental justice. See Lawrence Buell, The Future of Environmental Criticism:
50. Baba Amte, the satyagrahi known for his work with leprosy, gave the NBA instant national visibility when he joined the protests in 1989–90, despite his failing health; but it is Patkar who is largely seen as responsible for the grassroots mobilizing from 1985 until today.


53. For example, a localized small-scale water harvesting plan costing 90 million rupees which would bring water to 900 water-scarce villages in Gujarat, a state which stands to spend 200 million rupees for its dam-related costs.


janet walker

"After the storm, I came back. Things were so ... turned over that ... I actually got disoriented in the neighborhood that I grew up in."

James Gibson, III, Right to Return: New Home Movies from the Lower 9th Ward

The object of knowledge is, precisely, the fragmented and uncertain connection between elaborated representations of space on the one hand and representational spaces (along with their underpinnings) on the other, and this "object" implies (and explains) a subject—that subject in whom lived, perceived and conceived (known) come together within a spatial practice.

Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space