Contesting the Postcolonial Development Project: A Marxist Perspective on Popular Resistance in the Narmada Valley
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Introduction

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

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

1. This chapter presents arguments and empirical data that I have developed and presented previously in Nilsen 2007b, 2008, 2010, and 2011. The chapter draws heavily on these previous publications. My analysis of the Narmada Bachao Andolan owes a great deal to my joint work with Laurence Cox, who has taught me most of what I know about how to think about social movements with and through Marxist theory.
which they had benefited during the heyday of the developmental state.\textsuperscript{4} The current praxis of social movements in the global South seems to have developed beyond this defensive register towards a more offensive prefiguration of alternatives to processes of popular disenfranchisement and deprivation. The praxis of social movements in the global South constitutes a reinvention of the direction and meaning of development, at a time when the cracks and fissures of neoliberal hegemony are widening rapidly.\textsuperscript{5} It is precisely for this reason that we need to develop conceptually adequate and politically enabling analyses of the character and dynamics of subaltern resistance in the global South. In this chapter, I seek to contribute to this task by developing a Marxist analysis of popular resistance to dam-building on the Narmada River in India.

From the late 1960s onwards, India witnessed the emergence of new social movements (NSMs) that mobilised subaltern communities who had remained peripheral to the workings of the developmental state, and had fallen outside the political ambit of mainstream left-wing parties. These NSMs challenged the centralised developmentalism of the Nehru era, and fought for alternatives based on democratic participation, community control over natural resources, and the recognition of oppressed identities.\textsuperscript{6}

From the mid-1980s onwards, as Adivasi\textsuperscript{7} subsistence peasants and caste-Hindu farming communities started to mobilise against displacement by large dams, the Narmada Valley became an increasingly central arena for these struggles. The target of their mobilisation was the Narmada Valley Development-Project (NVDP), which envisages the construction of more than three thousand dams of varying sizes on the Narmada river, which runs from the Maikal ranges in Amarkantak in the Shahol district of Northern Madhya Pradesh to the Arabian Sea at Bharuch, Gujarat.\textsuperscript{8} Initially organised as social action groups across the three

\textsuperscript{4} Walton and Seddon 1994.
\textsuperscript{5} Motta and Nilsen 2011.
\textsuperscript{6} Omvedt 1993; Vanaik 1990.
\textsuperscript{7} The term ‘Adivasi’ literally means ‘first inhabitant’, and was coined by tribal rights activists early in the twentieth century to express their claim to being the indigenous people of India. The Indian government does not recognise Adivasis as being indigenous people, but defines Adivasi communities as belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes as per the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules – Schedules are basically lists in the Constitution that categorise and tabulate the bureaucratic activity and policy of the Government – provide an array of protective legislation, special entitlements and reservations for Adivasis. As such, they are expressive of the historical subordination and marginalisation of Adivasis in Indian society.
\textsuperscript{8} Several dams in the scheme – the Tawa dam (1973), Bargi (1989), the Barna, Sukta and Kolar dams, and, most recently, the Indira Sagar Project – have been completed. The concrete work on the SSP was brought to completion on 32 December 2006; the dam currently stands at 120 metres. The MHP\textsuperscript{P} was at a standstill from 2000 to 2006 due to a lack of funding, but construction work – and protest – resumed in 2006 as funds were