

WITHIN THE RIVER: COLLABORATION AND METHODOLOGY*

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The solidarity rally through the Narmada river valley arrives at Nisrapur, a village of 10,000 people near the banks of the river. This village is one of 62 slated for submergence as a result of the construction of dams along the Narmada. . . . People throng the streets. The beat of drums and metal thalis [plates] is interspersed with the trilling of flutes. . . . Slogans rend the air as flower petals rain down. Women and girls rush to apply red and yellow powder tilaks [devotional marks] to our foreheads. Rallyists swallowed by the crowd are swept along by the rhythm of the night, by the chanting, dancing, music-driven river of faces. The river swirls and eddies, flows forward and meanders. From the market square, long into the night, speeches, songs, and poems fill the air. Water is passed to slake our thirst. Like the Narmada river, it is water for life, not for the death that the dams will bring. A song of rebellion is taken up by the crowd and accompanied by rhythmic clapping. . . . Within it flows a message to all those who would sit back and bemoan the plight of the dispossessed and displaced of the world without doing anything to challenge it. It is simple: "So that there is no darkness to fear, so that life is not drenched with tears. . . . That is why we choose the path of struggle."

This extract from my summer 1999 research journal captures a moment of fieldwork, describing a struggle in central India that was an indelible part of my field experience. Its embodied philosophy of collaborative engagement raises questions about the appropriate practice of research. For three months of that summer, I conducted preliminary research on the construction of a multidam project in the Narmada Valley, India, and participated in resisting its construction.

THE RIVER

The Narmada River runs for 1,289 kilometers through the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, passing through fertile plains and a series of hill ranges including the Vindhyas and Satpuras. The river valley is home to wealthy cash-crop farmers and *adivasi* (tribal) subsistence farmers such as the Bhil and Bhilala. The Narmada Valley has been home to these peoples for generations, and the river is itself one of India's most sacred. Daughter of the Hindu god Shiva, Narmada is worshiped in numerous temples located along her banks. For generations, devotees have undertaken a *parikrama*, a foot pilgrimage along both banks of the river that traditionally takes three years, three months, and three days.

For forty years, since 1961, the distant central government has wanted to construct 30 large, 135 medium, and 3,000 small dams along the river to harness the

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