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 Vindhayas 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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waters of the Narmada and its tributaries in order to provide water and electricity for development. The Sardar Sarovar Dam is the largest, currently in operation at a height of 85 meters, with a final proposed height of 136.5 meters. More than fifty villages have already been submerged during its construction. The central government claims that the Sardar Sarovar Project will irrigate 1.8 million hectares, including the drought-prone areas of Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat. However, the dam already consumes 80 percent of Gujarat’s irrigation budget, with only 1.6 percent of cultivable land in Kutch and 9 percent of Saurashtra’s cultivable land in its command area. Most water will in truth irrigate the sugar farms of wealthy Gujarat farmers (Fisher 1995; Roy 1999). A spate of independent research on megadam projects documents them as ecological, economic, and cultural disasters that deliver but a fraction of purported benefits (McCully 1996).

When construction of the planned dams along the Narmada is completed, up to 15 million people (especially adivasis and peasant farmers) will eventually be displaced through flooding, the construction of a canal to divert water from the Sardar Sarovar Dam, and the establishment of construction colonies and wildlife sanctuaries. Mitigation and relocation for the displaced is at best woeful. When it has taken place, residents have been relocated on infertile land without a water source, their communities fragmented. Moreover, the regional government of Madhya Pradesh acknowledges that not enough land is available to resettle all of those who will be displaced (Roy 1999).

The movement to oppose the dams, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Free Narmada Movement) argues that water and energy can be provided to the people of the Narmada Valley, and to the drought-prone areas of Gujarat, through alternative technologies, especially locally managed watershed developments and planning processes that ought to be socially just and economically and environmentally sustainable. The NBA has waged a fifteen-year struggle to stop dam construction and the ensuing displacement. Each monsoon, as the height of the dam increases and the water levels rise, more villages face flooding and their inhabitants, displacement.

As I write, police camps dot the hills of the valley. Villagers and NBA activists are harassed, arrested, and subject to police violence. The threat of repression is as constant as the fear of flooding. The adivasis of Jalsindhi, Domkhedi, and other villages are faced with cultural submersion—of their homes, their crops, their livelihoods, their sacred sites. The rising waters of the dammed Narmada will drown the people’s memories of ancestors, memories evoked by living in this place. As people are forcibly displaced, culture nurtured by proximity to the river—language, songs, music—will be erased. Responding to this threat, NBA activists have formed the samarpit dal (dedicated squad), committed to jall samarpan, or surrender to the waters. As waters rise with monsoonal rains and submerge the villages, activists refuse to move from their homes, even at the cost of their lives. Militant nonviolence is summed up in the slogan, “We will drown, but we will not move.”

The conflict comprises interrelated forms of struggle. First, it is a representational struggle over the meaning of processes such as democracy and development,
a discursive conflict over different imagined geographies. The abstract space of the state stands against the lived space of tribal and peasant communities. Second, it is a material struggle over land and water resources, with the people of the valley struggling to protect cash crops, subsistence livelihoods, and cultures. The familiar story is common around the world, and it raises a methodological question: What contribution can geography make to a living politics of struggle?

Watching the River Flow

Zygmunt Bauman argues that the role of intellectuals has changed from a legislative one to an interpretive one. The interpretive role provides intellectuals with autonomy of expression but meager political power (1992). The exception to this would be those intellectuals who work as policy advisors to governments (such as Harvard University’s Robert Reich in the first Clinton administration) or those intellectuals whose work influences the political philosophy of a government (such as Anthony Giddens’s influence on the thinking of New Labour and the Third Wave in Britain). Examples of academics who are directly engaged in political activism are rare (Noam Chomsky and E. P. Thompson come to mind). Such engagements articulate what György Konrád has termed “anti-politics,” an assertion of permanent independence from the state whoever is in power (1984). Invoked are two forms of counter-hegemonic struggle. First are challenges to the representations imposed by political and economic elites upon the world and its different peoples, views deployed to serve geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Second are rejoinders to the material (economic and military) geopolitical power of states and global institutions.

Bauman argues that, for academics, “reality” itself—be it the realm of culture, politics, or economics—becomes “an object of study, something to be mastered only cognitively, as a meaning, and not practically, as a task” (1992, 23). Where academics take political action, the role tends to be less material than representational. Intellectual autonomy is highly valued by academics and, according to Bauman, staunchly defended “against the rebels from its own ranks who jeopardize the comforts of freedom, drawing the dusty skeleton of political commitment out of the old family cupboard” (p. 16).

More recently, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that academics’ desire to preserve their privileges in society has turned the committed intellectual of yesteryear increasingly into an uncommitted intellectual (1998). As holders of cultural capital, Bourdieu argues, academics are a dominant group in society (if a dominated group within the dominant). This is the foundation of what he refers to as academics’ ambivalence, an unwillingness to commit to struggles, offering thereby implicit support to the established order.

Academics have a talent for discursive politics, mounting challenges to dominant discourses. Conferences, academic journals, and universities resonate with base truths, making academia chock-full of elite privilege. Intellectual discourse is couched in the language of the dominant, at best marginal to the majority of everyday lives and concerns. Finally, representational challenges pose the most slender of material
threats to the existing political order; privileges are instead maintained by the continuation of that order. For the majority of people involved in struggles, such representational challenges are simply irrelevant. In the context of the Narmada River struggle, they are akin to watching the river flow and flood.

**Going with the Flow: Within the River**

Those who are concerned about the politics of geographical research speak about a need for engagement between the worlds of academia and activism. Feminist research, in particular, concerns itself with political commitment and critical and reflexive engagement. Influenced by this work, geographers have begun to address the politics of fieldwork, representational strategies, and collaborative research (Pile 1991; Crang 1992; Katz 1992; Keith 1992; McDowell 1992a, 1992b; Sidaway 1992; PG 1994; Radcliffe 1994; Shaw 1995). One result is discussion of the politics of geographical research and activism (Blomley 1994; Chouinard 1994; Imrie 1996; Castree 1999; Maxey 1999).

Collaborative methodologies can integrate theory, politics, and ethics. Conducting “political” research is equally about collaborating alongside activists in their struggles. As bell hooks suggests, activism is not bounded off from everyday life (1994). The geographer Stuart Corbridge has spoken of our lives as entwined with other lives in the legacies of colonialism, amid flows of capital and commodities, through modern telecommunications. Academics need to become politically sensitive to distant strangers (Corbridge 1993). Although Corbridge deals with development-aid issues, I prefer to consider how once-distant others become locally engaged, ceasing to be strangers by becoming collaborators. A practical engagement with social movements links critical discourses to lived struggles.

The People’s Global Action (PGA) network, which includes the NBA, voices its own agenda,¹ one with which I largely agree. It rejects socially and environmentally destructive globalization, rejects dominating power, supports nonviolent direct action and institutional political strategies,² and embraces locally supported alternatives based on a philosophy of decentralization and autonomy. Rather than form “guidelines for action,” in the phrasing of the authoritarian left, these represent an ethics of struggle that can be shared or adapted.

Why speak up for collaborative methodologies? They involve a deconstruction of state/elite discourse and practices. Critical theories can be placed in journals, conferences, classrooms, and activist writings. As readily and significantly, though, they offer material engagement, participation in networks beyond those of the academy. Reality is lived instead of serving as an abstract object for study. Groups such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, have inspired and moved so many (including academics) precisely because they represent a lived material reality.

Power relations are brokered between academic and activist collaborators (hooks 1994). While Michel Foucault asserts that power is ubiquitous and productive (1978, 1980), for J. K. Gibson-Graham authority is incomplete and but one element in a network of discursive interpretations, imbricated with distinct meanings (1994). As
academics, we are situated in a webbed space that dangles across gaps in understanding, rebounding with power and uncertainty. We had best attend to power relations between our own societies and those in which we conduct our work, as well as those that separate us as academics from our activist collaborators. To theorize and negotiate these differences and the connections forged through collaboration is to understand power relations as diverse and entangled (Sharp and others 2006).

In India I had the spectrum of privileges accruing to the white, male, Western academic: financial resources (funding), the ability to travel, and time to engage in critical evaluation while activists resisted the destruction of their local world. Yet my collaborators’ local knowledge concerning issues of development, politics, and resistance gave them power over the parameters and dynamics of our collaboration. Activists are capable of maneuvering the activity of intellectuals as an element in broader strategies and agendas, for they too are empowered.

In the Narmada struggle, I have sought out participation. First, I work in the struggle itself (Figure 1). This involved taking part in the monsoon satyagrahas of 1999 and 2000, participating in the 1999 Rally for the Valley, and living everyday life in resistance camps on the banks of the Narmada. For the movement I have written short articles about particular events and established preliminary protocols for academics who wish to do research in the Narmada Valley. Second, I have conducted a variety of solidarity work for the NBA: bringing PGA activists to the valley in 1999
following the PGA conference in Bangalore; conducting workshops on the Narmada struggle in the United Kingdom in order to raise consciousness about the issue and develop solidarity networks; and participating in, and even organizing, demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, and public meetings on behalf of the NBA. I have used the NBA and my experiences of it in my undergraduate courses at the University of Glasgow.

In a critique of the limited political commitment among contemporary academics, Bourdieu calls for collaboration and new forms of communication that could bring together researchers and activists (1998). Academics, he admonishes, ought not strike poses as figureheads for social movements or act as experts who give activists lessons that provide answers to all social-movement questions. Instead, “collective intellectuals” should seek a common ground and common cause in a nonhierarchical manner. Let them, Bourdieu suggests, break the appearance of unanimity that is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourses within society (1998, vii–viii). This requires development of a relational ethics of struggle within academia that accepts moral and political responsibility as an act of self-constitution (Bauman 1993). As Mike Kesby perceptively argues, we miss an important dimension of self-reflexivity if we fail to realize our own capacity to facilitate change in others’ lives (1998).

I would not want to restrict interpretation of what activism can or should be. As Ian Maxey has argued, activism is produced within a range of sites, including the media, grassroots organizations, and academia (1999). A constricted activism emphasizes dramatic, physical, and “masoch” forms of action. Maxey, however, argues that the social world is produced through everyday acts and thoughts; activism is the process of reflecting and acting. Everybody is a potential activist, producing the world, and reflexivity enables people to place themselves actively within this process.

Because the personal is political, all of this implies a commitment to deconstruct barriers between academics and the lives of the people they profess to represent, so scholarly work interprets and effects social change (Kobayashi 1994). Academics are routinely tangled within broader powers of association and intellectual production—with the institutions that employ us and/or fund our research—and their location within a global hierarchy that favors the West’s economic systems, institutions, and policy “experts” at the expense of those of the rest of the world, imagining the West as “the transcendental pivot of all analytical reflection” (Slater 1992, 312). We can make our political and institutional settings work for us in ways that effect social, environmental, and political change. The “field” of fieldwork becomes “located and defined in terms of specific political objectives” that “ideally work toward critical and liberatory ends” (Nast 1994, 57). The ways in which this can be done are as diverse as our imaginations.

Critical collaborative methodologies are crucial, it seems to me, because to fail to engage is to risk a retreat into bourgeois intellectualism that threatens to make geography irrelevant to the struggles of resisting others and, at worst, complicit with the regimes of control that critical geographers purport to be so critical of.
Resisting is about being within the river, within the flow of action, rather than watching it from the banks. It is about making politics the subject, rather than the object, of research so that life will not be drenched in tears.

Notes

1. Peoples Global Action is a network of social movements, resistance groups, and individuals from around the world whose main objectives are: 1) to inspire the greatest number of persons, movements, and organizations to act against corporate domination through nonviolent civil disobedience and people-oriented constructive actions; 2) to offer an instrument for coordination and mutual support at the global level for those who are resisting corporate rule and the capitalist development paradigm; and 3) to give more international projection to struggles against economic liberalization and global capitalism.

2. I advocate the use of nonviolent political struggle. However, this would not preclude solidarity work for those resistances against dominating power, such as the Zapatistas, that have adopted armed struggle as a defense against extermination.

3. These comprised a series of actions (rallies, meetings, demonstrations, and so forth) focused around the two adivasi villages of Domkhedi and falsindhi. These villages were faced with imminent submergence by the monsoon rains that raised the levels of the Narmada River, already swollen by the Sardar Sarovar Dam reservoir.

References


