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Learning and Leading: Resistance, Subaltern Leadership and the Making of Two Bhil Community Leaders from the Narmada Valley, Western India

Vikramaditya Thakur

I thank hundreds of villagers: fellow comrades from Nandurbar district who have hosted me for over 15 years, too many to be named individually, for making this research possible. I appreciate the help of my activist friends: Lok Sangharsh Morcha's Pratibha-tai Shinde and Sanjay Mahajan, and Dr. Kantilal Tatia. I thank K. Sivaramakrishnan, Vinay Gidwani, Sierra A.J. Bell, Elliott Prasse-Freeman, Sahana Ghosh, Uday Chandra, Richard Axelby, Brendan Donegan, Jayaseelan Raj, the editors of this special issue Joel Cabalion and Delphine Thivet, and the four anonymous reviewers for their comments on the various drafts. I express my gratitude for funding my fieldwork and archival research to my parents during 2003-07, Yale Agrarian Studies Department, Yale MacMillan Center and the American Institute of Indian Studies during 2010-13, and Social Science Research Council and European Research Council during 2014-16.

- 1 This paper studies the changing nature of rural leadership in India among the Scheduled Tribes,¹ popularly called Adivasi groups, in the wake of a long-running social movement over a period of three decades, by focusing on two community leaders and their evolution over time. It looks at the struggle of the Bhils, one of the largest ST groups of India, in the Maharashtra portion of the Narmada valley in the Nandurbar district. The Bhils from the Narmada valley have resisted their forced displacement by the Indian state due to the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) dam across the River Narmada, which began in 1985, and continued their struggle after their forced relocation from the hills to the plains' resettlement colonies beginning in 1991 in various phases. This struggle has unfolded in the wake of a long-running and celebrated anti-dam movement of the Narmada Bachao

Andolan² led by its external middle-class upper-caste activists from urban background beginning in 1985 and continuing in the present.

- 2 The SSP Dam is arguably one of the most controversial development projects globally, with over a dozen academic monographs, several edited volumes and hundreds of journal articles focusing on it. The extensive academic literature on the Narmada dam from the 1980s, largely in line with the NBA stand, framed the problem as one revolving around the issue of environment and displacement of tribal groups living in the hills that was highlighted by the external activists. Among the monographs that focus on the NBA-led movement, one set of scholars lauds the subaltern mobilization by the external middle-class activists against the powerful state. This includes the work of Sanjeev Khagram (2004) and Patrick McCully (2001) that focuses on the triumph of the NBA activists in highlighting their cause through transnational activism and protests in the urban centers; Alf G Nilsen (2010) that emphasizes the grassroots mobilization by the NBA activists in resisting the hegemonic state representing the interests of the dominant classes; and Sanjay Sangvai (2002) that is a partisan account by a founder member of the NBA focusing on the mobilization's history and various aspects of the dam. Another set of scholars show the lack of subaltern agency in the movement and argue for a clear distinction between the urban and educated NBA activists and the suffering rural masses. This includes Amita Baviskar (2004), who focuses on development via forced displacement that serves as the postcolonial avatar of exploitation in a series of historical injustices against the Bhils over centuries (2004:228; 240). Their resistance against the dam in order to save their homes and way of life however gets assimilated by urban intellectuals and environmentalists for a critique of development (2004:228; 240). It also includes the work of Judith Whitehead (2010), who concentrates on accumulation by dispossession of "indigenous" Bhils, while taking a historical perspective. A crucial aspect missing in these works is ascribing agency to the Bhils themselves, that are either obediently standing with the external activists in facing the "state repression" (Baviskar 2004:209) against their forced displacement or surrender to the state in order to get improved compensation. Thus, when they do have agency on rare occasions, it is shown in a negative light, where they are "hustlers" delivering their fellow men to the resettlement offices for money (Baviskar 2004:263) or "give up" the resistance to get "better lands" in the relocation colony (Whitehead 2010:150).³
- 3 In contrast, I show the anti-SSP dam mobilization and the subsequent forced resettlement as long-drawn processes that were in large measures led, and implemented by, the Bhil leaders themselves on behalf of their kinsmen, following complex negotiations with the state, an aspect that does not appear to have been addressed in any of the prior studies. The Bhil leaders formed their own organizations and also resorted to nonviolent forms of protest prior to and after their relocation to demand basic amenities in the new setting. I show their collective struggle by focusing on the lives of two Bhil men, Fattesing Pawara and Balram Vasave, who are the leading exemplars of Bhil subaltern agency. Fattesing and Balram, who started their political careers as foot soldier and youth leader respectively under the tutelage of the external activists of the NBA-led movement, learned about the functional aspects of the modern state by being part of the protest movement. They also drew on the same techniques of protest action for making claims on the state learned from the NBA activists in order to pursue their independent agendas over time. In the dyad comprised of elite and subaltern activists, I am thus arguing for a subaltern agency that develops over time as an incidental byproduct of and due to its

periodic association with elite-led mobilization but nevertheless implements its own agenda in the long run.

- 4 One major reason for the failure to identify and highlight the issue of agency among the Bhils of the Narmada valley is that their community has been represented as a homogenous acephalous social formation at the village level in all the existing studies. This gap in highlighting the traditional village power centers whose origins date back to the precolonial period is evident in studies by anthropologists (Karve 1956; Naik 1956) as well as historians (Guha 1996; 1999; Skaria 1999).⁴ The sections below will show how those traditional leaders, with formal or informal recognition from the state authorities, operated at the village level until the coming of the SSP dam, how they were utilized by the NBA's external urban activists to gain widespread acceptance among the Bhils in a very short period to mount an effective anti-dam campaign, and how a new set of Bhil youth leaders emerged to sideline the traditional leadership over time. I also show how the protest against the SSP dam served as a form of political education, creating leaders out of ordinary Bhils who displaced their traditional Bhil counterparts, and also charted a distinct course away from the urban NBA activists to formulate an independent discourse that they continued to develop after their move to the plains' resettlement colonies. This narrative is preceded by the methodology, highlighting of the theoretical issues at stake as well as introducing the two Bhil protagonists of the paper in the next section.
- 5 Following the course of change for subaltern groups at the margins of society that are illiterate and have an oral culture is a challenging task, especially when there are scanty records to establish the progression of events. It is in this setting that biographical narrative has the capacity to illuminate the interplay between the social, historical and the personal life histories of individuals to reflect on the struggles of the wider group (Arnold and Blackburn 2004), whether it is a biography of a leader of farmers (Byres 1988) or the autobiography of a Dalit describing what it meant "growing up untouchable" (Moon 1995). The biographies of Fattesing and Balram are based on extended conversations over a 15-year period. Though the narrative below largely features the voices of the two Bhils, I have crosschecked the data in independent conversations with many other Bhils from dozens of villages both in the hills and the resettlement colonies, and also with external activists of several groups, local journalists and government officials. I also draw on written records generated by the two Bhil leaders as well as the records of social movements that worked among the Bhils. Archival work was conducted in various local Government of Maharashtra (GoM) offices dealing with the SSP dam, district record room Nandurbar, office of the Marathi-language daily *Swatantra Bharat* and in the Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), Bangalore for English dailies. I also draw on my experiences and field notes across 15 years, first as a fellow grassroots activist working with the Narmada valley Bhils during 2001–2003, and thereafter as a researcher living in their villages for periods ranging from one month to almost two years until 2016.



First Meetings with Two Organic Peasant Intellectuals in 2001

- 6 I begin my narrative by describing the stark contrast in my first meetings with the two protagonists: Fattesing and Balram.⁵ I first met Fattesing on a cloudy afternoon in August 2001 in a resettlement colony of the Bhils displaced by the SSP dam. A lanky man, nearly six feet in height, unusually tall in comparison to most of his fellow men, he was about 45 years of age. He sported a pencil-thin moustache and wore a starched white kurta with two pens peeping out of its pocket. He had donned white pajamas, a Gandhi-*topi* (similar to a sailor cap, popularized during the anticolonial struggle by M.K. Gandhi, now donned by politicians), gold-rimmed glasses and black leather footwear. It was told to me later that he was practically illiterate though he could read and sign his name. I was a neophyte activist working with a social movement organization, Punarwasan Sangharsh Samiti (literally Resettlement Struggle Group).⁶ The PSS organized the Bhils displaced by the SSP dam on the Narmada River, demanding that the state fulfill the promises given to the people when they were moved to the resettlement colonies in the plains. It was run by a wife-and-husband team, Pratibha Shinde and Sanjay Mahajan, both around the age of 30, who hailed from a neighboring district and believed in socialist ideology. They were not Bhils, but came from a rural farming background and had a vernacular education. I had gone to question Fattesing's absence from the *dharna* (protest rally) a few days back and gave him a long speech on the value of unity and the ideals of the movement. Speaking in chaste Marathi, the state language of Maharashtra, he cut me short rudely. "Don't preach me Vikram. I learnt all this all while you were this small," he said showing the length of his index finger. On my return back to the PSS office, my senior Sanjay *bhau*—*bhau* is honorific for elder brother in Marathi—remarked, "He was the one who defected from the NBA and got along 12 villages in one night for resettlement." I later

heard this same story from many others. As per the application submitted by Fattesing on behalf of the 12 villages of Akrani *taluka* (unit of a district comprising many villages) to the local GoM office, this decision to accept resettlement took place on July 26, 1991.⁷

- 7 My first interaction with the other principal character, Balram, took place less than a month later on our way to another *dharna* of the NBA and the PSS in Maharashtra's capital Mumbai, incidentally on September 11 in 2001.⁸ A clean-shaven man with a gaunt look, he was less than five and a half feet in height, around the age of 50, sported a tattered white shirt, a pen stuck in its pocket, worn-out black trousers and cheap plastic footwear. As we talked in a passenger train moving with hundreds of other Bhils on our way to the protest rally, I found him to be a person with a ready smile and a very genial personality. He was the only Bhil in his generation across dozens of villages in the hills who was not only literate, but had also been formally schooled until grade seven. Allied with the NBA, he was still holding the fort in the hills, with most families in his own village and the neighboring ones declining to relocate even as the dam's height continued to rise. Welcomed by several senior government officials, he later brought along the Bhils from his village and three other neighboring ones to a new resettlement colony in the summer of 2004.
- 8 In the South Asian context, Ranajit Guha (1988), writing about the methodology of the Subaltern Studies project, says that parallel to elite politics, there is an autonomous domain of subaltern politics that neither originates from the former nor depends on it. Arild Rudd (2003) notes a dramatic transformation among the rural population of Bengal's agricultural plains in the postcolonial period: "A simplistic dichotomy-based model does not allow an understanding of the interplay of local to the supralocal society, or the ability of the local to change and adapt" (p. 4). Anirudh Krishna's (2007) study of rural India finds the emergence of *naye neta*, i.e. new village leaders who are experienced in dealing with government officials, possess a functional knowledge of modern institutions like banks and have slowly displaced the traditional rural elites as the power centers in their villages.
- 9 In terms of the function they serve, these new leaders have close parallels with the brokers and fixers that the classic work of F.G. Bailey (2001) describes, who make a profession of bridging the immense gap between the villagers and administrators, getting a share for their time, trouble and expertise (p.41). Drawing on Rudd and Krishna, I show that the ascendancy of Balram and Fattesing was achieved by acquiring linguistic, educational, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2003). Whether it was for carving a political career, as in the work of Krishna, or for material benefits, as in the work of Bailey, the brokers are, however, merely providing a service for the group they represent to various state agencies in a patron-client relationship. Nor does the concept of brokers, as analyzed by David Lewis and David Mosse (2006), who do the work of "translation" (p. 2,14) adequately cover the range of activities of the two Bhil leaders I describe below.
- 10 The two leaders not only worked closely with state agencies and social movement organizations (or created similar structures themselves) to shape the implementation of a specific state project of resettlement, but, more crucially, gave a new worldview to fellow hill Bhils. This happened even as the two leaders refashioned themselves to adapt to a new setting, providing a model for the succeeding generation of their youths. They are like the "peasant intellectuals" that Steven Feierman (1990:18) describes in his study of rural northern Tanzania. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals (1971:4), but also differing from it in the sense that there is no place for

centralism, or leadership of a working class as well a Communist Party that are crucial for the Gramscian notion, Feierman's peasant intellectuals are ordinary men and women, little different from the others in their community, who earned their livelihood by farming and who at crucial historical moments organized political movements of the greatest long-term significance and elaborated new forms of discourse. In contrast to Feierman's tribal intellectuals who were systematically sidelined by the independence party once the historical objective of ending colonial rule was achieved, the two Bhil leaders remained acutely aware of both the opportunities and limitations provided by the larger societal structure and the Bhils' marginal position in it. These rural leaders consequently kept *changing* alliances as well as strategies in their efforts to make claims on the state for themselves and on behalf of their fellow Bhils in the hills, and later in the newly settled resettlement colonies of the plains. This awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses ensured they continued to remain relevant and kept shaping a new mode of socio-economic and political life for all the resettled Bhils, even after the initial tension and stress of the permanent relocation had been resolved and the Bhil families were putting down roots in their new but alien surroundings.

Life in the Narmada Valley before the Dam

- 11 The exact month and year in which Balram and Fattesing were respectively born were never recorded, as was true for most people of their generation living in Akrani *taluka* of Nandurbar district. Akrani, along with Akkalkuwa *taluka* to its west, is situated in the midst of the Satpura hills and housed a large section of the Narmada valley through which the River Narmada covers its Maharashtra portion before joining the Arabian Sea. The river forms the natural boundary of three states, with Madhya Pradesh in the east and Gujarat on the northern side. For the thousands of Bhil families living in the midst of the Satpura hills, who subsisted by practicing shifting agriculture along with hunting, gathering and fishing, the absence of familiar signs of the government: village-level administrative offices, health centers and state-run schools, obviated the need for the creation and maintenance of records that forms an essential part of the modern state. Besides, near complete illiteracy in the hill villages, along with unfamiliarity with the Gregorian calendar, made it impossible to maintain even personal notes relating on births.
- 12 A hilly terrain that was thickly forested until 5 decades ago and remains largely unconnected by roads even today, this malaria-prone area was closely integrated with the socio-economic processes of the region (Guha 1999), until the British took control in the middle of the nineteenth century (Deshpande 1987). The British constituted the Khandesh district in 1818 (Government of Bombay 1880).⁹ The colonial rulers judged the area to possess too little economic value to merit the revenue survey and land settlement that were undertaken in the neighboring plains for ensuring taxation of settled agriculture. Surveys were twice abandoned as the expenditure and time spent on subjecting the hilly tracts to revenue settlement was felt to be too high (Government of Bombay 1930:1). They instead brought the area under their forest department regime (Government of Bombay 1880:16–18). Due to the absence of land settlement even in the postcolonial period, the Bhils technically remained “encroachers” on government property all along, despite living in the hill villages for generations. The forest department guards annually

fined the Bhils for farming on the state's land yet harassed them regularly, a common problem across large parts of the Indian subcontinent.

- 13 A closer look in the hills, however, reveals that the ground reality was complex. The forest department guards and policemen, the only face of the state familiar to the hill villages, hardly ever interacted with the ordinary Bhils who were in any case too afraid of them. The personnel instead dealt only with the *karbhari* (manager) of the village. A traditional post that went back all the way to the pre-colonial period, the *karbharis* wielded immense clout in their respective villages and adjudicated on all conflicts (Gare 1997; Patil 1989:19). Another institution introduced by colonial rule was that of police *patil*, who were entrusted with the task of reporting any crime in their given jurisdiction. The police *patils* could choose to implicate a person for a crime that he/she did not commit or simply ignore and not report even a murder if they wished. When an ordinary Bhil wanted to carve a fresh patch of land to grow coarse grains by the method of shifting agriculture prevalent across the hills, they went to their *karbhari* who would allot them land.¹⁰ The “payment,” i.e. bribe, for clearing the fresh patch of forest was negotiated by the *karbhari*. They dealt with the *faris khata* (forest department) *shipda* (guard) and also entertained them in their houses with *kukdi* (chicken) and *horo* (locally brewed alcohol). These twin institutions of *karbhari* and police *patil* constituted the traditional *pudhari* (leaders) and had powers of life and death over the Bhils. Both the institutions of *karbhari* and police *patil*—at times, the same person in a village could hold both the positions—are hereditary posts that passed on to the sons. This also meant that certain lineages in the villages were more powerful and cornered the best farming plots. Like every other Bhil in the area, these two local hegemonies were illiterate; unlike the Bhils who only spoke their hill dialects; these two could speak a smattering of Marathi, the provincial language. This state of affairs continued until the 1980s, when the postcolonial state decided to build a dam across the Narmada River and submerge large parts of the valley.



The Dam and the Samiti

- 14 The SSP project, stuck in the planning stage for decades, saw ground activity from the early 1980s (Paranjypte 1990), though the Bhils to be affected found about it much later. The proposed dam just inside Gujarat's border was going to submerge hundreds of villages in the three states, including Maharashtra. In Maharashtra it was submerging 33 villages, many of them partially, involving over 4000 families comprising over 20,000 people. Fattasing, then a young man, recalled:

Most of us found out about the dam only around 1985 or so as whispers started doing the rounds. Someone had heard something from some shopkeeper while on a trip to the Kavat market, Gujarat and told it to others.¹¹ Or perhaps, it came from some other source. No one seemed to have any concrete information.

A report, based on fieldwork by a team of researchers found that in many cases, those in the affected area did not even know about the proposed dam, reflecting on the callous manner of the Indian state's bureaucracy and their indifference to the issue of forced displacement (Multiple Action Research Group Report 1987).¹² For most Bhils, the definitive news came when, to cite Balram Vasave, "Medha-tai [Medha Patkar]¹³ came along with Vasudha-tai [Vasudha Dhagamvar] in 1985 and later made more trips on her own."¹⁴

- 15 Fattasing, describing the setting up of the Narmada Dharangrast Samiti (Narmada Dam-affected Group),¹⁵ referred to simply as "Samiti" and the external activists as "Samiti-valas," and his own association with it, said:

Medha-tai first came to Gana karbhari's house and later got in touch with Balram. Balram, an educated person hence a rarity among us, along with one of his elder brothers soon became a leader of the Samiti in the Akrani villages. A Karbhari Samiti [council] involving the traditional village heads was setup that started meeting periodically. We all disbelieved the story of the dam initially.

By getting the *karbhari*s on board, Medha rapidly gained acceptance among the Maharashtra submergence villages.

- 16 Balram had received a formal education due to a fortuitous set of circumstances when the isolation of the Narmada valley was broken briefly by M.K. Gandhi's successor, Vinoba Bhave, who, while working for his countrywide Bhudan Movement of land distribution (Oommen 1972; Bhave 1954), visited the remote hills. Balram recalled:

As part of his mission, Vinoba visited our hills in September 1958 along with many followers (Anonymous 1958a; Anonymous 1958b).¹⁶ One of his followers stayed back to run a school for a short period. He saw potential in me and convinced my reluctant parents to send me to Alandi town in Pune district where I lived and studied till class 7. I however returned to get married and started farming in the hills. I not only got a good education but exposure to the life in the plains. As a result, though I was neither a *karbhari* nor a police *patil*, I was one of the first and most important members of the Karbhari Samiti right from the beginning. I was the only one in my community who could interpret the various state documents, read the newspaper coverage of our movement by Marathi dailies and help our Bhil leaders to analyze the developments. As part of the NDS, we presented a list of 21 demands to the district government office in the summer of 1986 asking them to recognize our land rights in the submergence village. Our third demand in the list was the release of forest department land in the neighboring plains for our resettlement within the same district.¹⁷

Balram and one of the *karbharis* were the only two Bhils whose names appeared in the list of supplicants in that memorandum.

- 17 For Fattensing, on the other hand, it was an unremarkable beginning. He recalled:

It was probably in early 1986 when Medha-tai called Gana-daya—daya is honorific for aged men—for a periodic meeting of the Karbhari Samiti in Village Molgi, Akkalkuwa taluka. A day before the group from Akrani villages was to begin their daylong trek to Molgi, I begged him: ‘*Man bi number lagad de daya*,’ (take me along to the meeting) and the *karbhari* agreed. It meant a lot to me for only the big *pudharis* were part of that meeting.

This move was the lucky break that allowed Fattensing to sneak into the circle of the traditional valley elites for the first time and also catch the attention of external activists such as Medha. Fattensing described his humble beginning as an activist:

My work was to run errands and pass on messages to the *pudharis* (*karbharis* and police *patils*) in various *faliyas* (hamlets; also *pada*) across villages. It was a tough job given the hilly terrain and the way movements work, one had to run *rat-berat* (odd times) but I found it thrilling. An activist named Ramesh Patil, fluent in Marathi though not English came from Mumbai city to work with us.

Along with the Samiti came new songs and slogans about the trouble caused by the forest department, and petitions to the state departments (Nilsen 2010:85–90). The Samiti led by Medha was soon holding periodic meetings of the Karbhari Samiti in the hills, besides the submission of a memorandum to various state agencies, and was later holding protests rallies in the various plains’ towns and cities. Though placed differently in the movement hierarchy, both Balram and Fattensing were learning a new set of rules for engaging the state. Given his innate ability to remember names and his talent for recognizing a face even in a big crowd, along with his willingness to run errands any time of the day, Fattensing was uniquely suited to the mobilization efforts of the Samiti, both within the hills and for activities outside, which were being organized by external activists such as Medha and Ramesh.

- 18 A crucial part of the way the movement functioned was that the external activists conveyed the developments related to the dam and their plan of protest-action to the *karbhari* council, who in turn conveyed it to their people. The traditional leaders thus acted as the link between the Bhils and the external activists. As the movement grew in stature and started getting the attention of outsiders, including the press, the articulate Balram became one of the faces of the affected villages to the outside world. Fate had other things in store for Fattensing.

Exile, Empowerment and Return of Fattensing

- 19 At some point in 1986, Fattensing picked up a fight with the powerful police *patil* of his village, found little support from others and was driven out. Leaving his wife and two young children with his father, he went to work as a casual laborer in the big market yard in the neighboring plains. Medha stumbled across him one day and made him an offer: was he interested in attending a workshop on agriculture lasting two years? Besides boarding and lodging, he would be paid the same wages that he got in the yard daily. Fattensing was skeptical but agreed to give it a shot. His life was about to change.
- 20 Agricultural experts from the city sympathetic to the Bhils conducted the workshop held in the nearby town. The chief instructor was Charudutt Dabholkar who had done pioneering experiments on agricultural techniques.¹⁸ It had been organized by the

activists of another movement, Maharashtra Dharan va Prakalpgrast Shetkari Parishad (Maharashtra Dam and Project Impacted Farmers' Council). Founded in the early 1960s, they had played a pivotal role in forcing the GoM to legislate a land-for-land resettlement policy in 1976 regarding dam-displaced people in Maharashtra, a first for any Indian state.¹⁹ This resettlement law did not apply in the case of the SSP dam as it was an inter-state project. A group of young Bhils, used to the slash-and-burn practice of shifting cultivation in the hills, was being instructed in the methods of settled agriculture. The objective was to teach them to produce grains in the plains using experimental farming techniques to ensure sufficient output to feed a family from a one-hectare field when they were moved to the plains by the state. While the other Bhils found it too complex and started dropping out, Fattasing showed a keen interest. During afternoons, while the others enjoyed their siesta, he started visiting Dinanath Manohar, a former communist activist who taught him to read and sign his name, though he never progressed to writing.²⁰ He also learnt about police and forest department laws at the venue of the workshop, Jan Seva Mandal, a center of Jesuit priests inspired by liberation theology. Fattasing recounted to me years later how he was "amazed to know that people cannot be arrested by the police without a written complaint or an arrest warrant from a magistrate." When I visited the old-timers at Jan Seva to collect more details of this forgotten workshop 25 years later in April 2011, I met Jayant Padvi, aged 50, a Bhil activist who worked with the clergy there. Jayant recalled, "It was James *bhau* [Brother James] who conducted workshops in the 1980s teaching us Bhils about the structure of the Indian state with emphasis on its laws and development schemes." Jayant also corroborated Fattasing's story and added in Bhili:

Tiyan timeopa chyun manhan khup badli giyo (that man got transformed during that period). He came bare-bodied wearing a *khosti* (loin cloth), an attire typical of hill Bhils, only spoke Bhili dialects, barely understood Marathi and had little idea of the larger world. He walked out wearing a shirt-pant and armed with lots of practical knowledge that few Bhils possessed.

Upon his return to the hills, Fattasing used his newly acquired skills to resolve a police-case. He ensured that the accused Bhils were freed without the payment of a bribe. He was now sought by all the *karbharis* and had become their equal in the eyes of the common Bhil.

Bhil Leaders Pursuing Independent Paths

- 21 Fattasing resumed his work with the Samiti, which was being reshaped. By 1988, the Samiti led by Medha had changed its stand from demanding resettlement to opposing the dam and had a new name: the NBA. Ramesh Patil had left for his hometown while other external activists from the cities of Mumbai and Pune, high caste young men and women from upper-caste middle-class background with college degrees from premier educational institutes and fluent in English, had joined the group. Using print media and by cultivating environmental NGOs in the Global North, they conducted the anti-dam campaign that soon became very prominent (Khagram 2004). Protest rallies in big cities and extended hunger strikes by Medha, and at times by a few Bhil *karbharis*, were undertaken. Beginning in 1988, the external activists proposed *ganv bandi* (village closure) for all government officials, which was whole-heartedly adopted by the Karbhari Samiti (Baviskar 2004:208). Already cut off from the plains due to the absence of road, the

external activists now became the sole source of information relating to happenings outside of the hills for the Bhil leadership.

- 22 As the movement waged while work on the dam continued, the Government of Maharashtra took sincere steps to resolve the deadlock. It brought in a new resettlement officer in July 1990, who started to move in the villages.²¹ The official faced boycotts and was not allowed to enter many hill villages, though his persistent efforts ensured he could enter some of the hamlets in a few villages. Unlike the forest guards and policemen, he addressed all villagers with respect and struck up good friendships with several Bhil leaders, including Gana Karbhari and Fattasing, though the latter two still swore by the NBA movement. “For us, *shasan* (government) till then meant only the forest department or the police. This *sahib* (official here) was an unlikely *sahib*,” recalled Fattasing fondly. “He would visit remote hamlets on foot, talking to people. Of course, most people did not speak out as is the wont, only the *pudharis* shared their misgivings.”
- 23 The schism between the external activists and the Bhils’ leaders soon came to the fore, with Fattasing charting a new course. When Medha found out about the hobnobbing of Fattasing with the resettlement officials, she was furious and sent him a note that said he should not attend future meetings of the NBA. This infuriated Fattasing, who felt that his integrity had been questioned. The official’s sincerity struck a chord when he and the traditional Bhil *pudharis* found out the state had already changed its stand in June 1990 and was willing to give them the forest department land in the plains that they had demanded in 1986 (Anonymous 1990a).²² Fattasing recalled:

The government had taken the decision several months earlier (Anonymous 1990b).

²³ The *baherche karyakarte* (external activists) had however not shared this information with us.²⁴ When the dam’s gates were closed and water started to rise, the external activists remained firm asking us Bhils to drown our houses and farms for the whole world to witness but our people got panicky. The *karbharis* and *patils* were at a loss but I had already made up my mind: we are all farmers with family and children; it was pointless to stay back and refuse the fertile agricultural land being offered by the state that we ourselves had demanded. I convinced the *pudharis* and assured them that I would be able to deal with the state if there was any problem later.

Fattasing reminisced further:

I now realized the need for a new set of skills to deal with the state, including a lot of drafting skills on a regular basis to compose numerous petitions to various state agencies. I closely involved my young paternal cousin, Gamirsing who had recently returned from a plains’ school and was educated till class 10. Having worked closely with the Samiti, I was aware of the format of the applications, and had learned the ability to read, so I would dictate the contents as he wrote them down.

12 of the 24 villages of Akrani *taluka* facing submergence, either partially or fully accepted the state’s offer to relocate them in a single day in 1991.²⁵ With reference to this move, instead of the phrase “*phut padne*” meaning “to cause a split” used by the external PSS activists, Fattasing used the words, “*amhi baher nighun alo*” (we walked out).

- 24 Looking back at his move in 1991 two decades later, Fattasing shared his thoughts one evening in August 200:

No outsider can ever understand what it means for a person to leave his ancestral land forever. I often see it in my dreams. But the state’s offer of this fertile agricultural land of our choice along with a housing colony was the best thing that could have happened to us. Now it is up to us to do what we make of it, cultivate well and rise or drink *daru* (liquor) all the time and face ruin. With increasing

population and shrinking land, life in the hills is not what it used to be in my parents' generation. Those still perched up will come down soon.

His claim was backed by the ground reality as an increased population and deforestation in the Narmada valley from the middle of the twentieth century had already resulted in the beginning of seasonal migration to the plains for working in the sugarcane fields and the numbers have kept rising through the years (Thakur 2014).

- 25 Fattasing at that time was indirectly referring to Balram who was still holding fort in the valley with several villages, though they had to shift their houses further up in the hills as the dam's water stood at 80 meters of the proposed 138 meters. Balram recalled the strained period of the early 1990's:

Unlike the present, the ordinary Bhils followed their traditional *pudharis* in every decision though both understood little of the life outside the hills. In that tense moment, some of the *karbharis* in the low-lying villages reposed their faith in the abilities of Fattasing. In today's times with roads, mobile phones and all the exposure that the new generation of our educated children have, it is difficult to imagine the totally different world of the hills or the peculiar situation regarding lack of information and the dilemma it created in the hill villages back then. I was however convinced that the land offered for resettlement that time would not be able to accommodate everyone. Then there were various feuds within the different clans so they would not have lived happily together. I was invited to meet the Chief Minister of Maharashtra in 1991 as the sole representative of the Bhils but did not budge despite tempting offers.

New Discourse for the Plains

- 26 On reaching the plains, the Bhils found that the resettlement colonies lacked basic amenities; many had been given uncultivable land while yet others received nothing. "There were many problems," Fattasing recalled. It was in this setting that he decided to protest using the modern nonviolent methods that he had seen the external activists of the NBA resort to several times. Shunned by the NBA activists, he soon got in touch with two other external social activists, Pratibha and Sanjay. Fattasing asked them to help contact local Marathi-language dailies as he sat on a hunger strike to demand that the state honor its promises. He decided to organize a *dharna* (sit-in) of the relocated Bhils in front of the GoM *taluka* office at Taloda in 1995 and resort to a hunger strike himself. A keen observer, he was aware that the protest itself would have no impact on the state machinery and they would be simply ignored. The trick was to have it covered by the news media, at-least the local vernacular dailies. He recalled:

I realized that if I sat on a hunger strike, activities including keeping the morale of the other protestors high, composition and distribution of periodic press releases and negotiating with the state officials could not be handled by any of the *karbharis* so I needed external help.

Thus the PSS came into being in 1995.

- 27 By the time I came into the picture in 2001, Fattasing had joined the Congress political party and was dismissive of all external activists. On my return to the area in December 2003 as an independent researcher, I found he had been elected the *sabhapati*, i.e. chairperson of the Panchayat Samiti in the local government body.²⁶ From an illiterate ordinary Bhil from the hills, he had managed to carve a space in the highly contested electoral political field of the plains. When I went to the office building to witness his swearing-in, I found that the police *patils* and *karbharis* who once made him run errands

cheered the loudest. He had also prospered into a successful farmer growing cash crops. He achieved this with a canny mix of older social values of the Narmada valley along with his newly acquired familiarity with life in the plains. He used his extended kinship network, under the guidance of his industrious father, to grow cash crops, including cotton, combining their individual plots of land allotted by the state. He also pushed his younger brother and son to train as a doctor and an engineer respectively. He has remained the role model for the other resettled Bhils by setting to a new discourse, away from the life in the hills that was guided by the *karbharis*, for the plains marked by a new set of crops and push for education for their children while integrating them with the mainstream political process from a position of strength.



- 28 When Fattasing chose to move out with one set of *karbharis*, Balram remained in the valley with the NBA-led movement. He now became the sole power-center in the hills. The Supreme Court of India suspended work on the completion of the dam for five years from 1994–1999. Beginning in 1988–1989 itself, the NBA-led movement presented Balram as a prominent face of the Bhils facing displacement to the external world. He travelled far and wide, including to European countries, accompanying Medha and giving interviews and talks about the uncertainty caused by displacement. Upon the resumption of the dam's construction, he finally moved away from the NBA-led movement and took three villages with him to a new resettlement colony in 2004. Like the *karbharis* and Fattasing before him, Balram had moved his constituency along with him to a colony of his choice to maintain his power.
- 29 The choice of resettlement colony made by Balram was in an area that was a stronghold of the dominant peasant caste of Gujars who had a history of exploiting the plains' Bhils as a source of cheap labor for over a century (Paranjape 1981). The resettlement colony, along with the neighboring plains' village of the Gujars, got clubbed into one unit for local village elections with the seat being reserved for an ST person as per the government's rules to support affirmative action. Fattasing convinced the Gujar leadership to support the candidate of the resettled Bhils instead of having a proxy Bhil candidate of the Gujars from their (Gujar) village. The resettled Bhils' candidate was elected as the village head in

each of the elections held in 2005 and 2011. When I mentioned his persuasive skills, he said self-effacingly:

Based on my long experience as an activist trying to reconcile opposing views among various factions, I try to find a path that is least antagonistic yet beneficial. It is not as if Bhils from three villages housed together don't have conflicts. My proposal was to opt for a candidate through consensus rather than contest, first to the resettlement colony and then to the Gujars with the solemn promise that the elected representative will be a capable person and work for both the villages. I am old so I pushed our next generation of educated youth to lead as they understand the plains' life better.

He did not add that he had little time for electoral politics given his involvement in experimenting with new varieties of cash crops, first cotton and later papaya from 2010 onwards, something that the other resettled Bhils then emulated (Shah, Lerche, Axelby, Benbabali, Donegan, Raj and Thakur 2018:195–200).

- 30 Given the slow pace of the implementation of the resettlement package that is typical of most Indian state projects, both Fattasing in the first decade from 1995–2005 and Balram from 2004 onwards continued to make repeated representations to the state along with protest rallies. The pressure from the NBA against the dam indirectly helped their cause as the state tried to show that the resettlement was getting attention. Balram, while maintaining cordial relations with the NBA to draw on their support even in the plains, also developed close ties with the external PSS activists. Both leaders also pushed their next generation of Bhils to acquire an education, with many of the youth acquiring undergraduate degrees from local colleges. This first generation of educated youth under their guidance organized themselves into *yuva samitis* (youth councils) in their respective resettlement colonies, which continue to make representations on behalf of the resettled families. These youth groups have been slowly moving away from the external activists of both the NBA and the PSS, while successfully resolving issues related to individual families. The process of making claims was continuing when I last visited the colonies in March 2016.



Conclusion

- 31 The existing literature on the mobilization against the SSP dam on River Narmada is narrowly focused on the moment of displacement. This paper instead covered a wider stretch of time spanning three generations of the Bhils and the process of transition from their homes in the hills to their new location in the plains' resettlement colonies, to highlight the primacy of subaltern Bhil agency. It began by showing the role of the traditional leadership of the *karbharis* and the police *patils* in the hill villages as powerful hegemony who also served as the link between the ordinary Bhils and the outside world, whether forest department officials from the colonial period or the NBA's external urban activists from the 1980s. The coming of the SSP dam and the movement opposing it broke the isolation of the Narmada valley and the consequent turmoil led to the inadvertent rise of new Bhil youth leaders such as Fattesing and Balram. The movement initiated by the external activists along with other random encounters acted as a form of political tutorial for them. The two leaders, over the course of three decades, slowly managed to displace their traditional leaders, successfully challenged their NBA mentors in the hills, the PSS activists in the plains and, most crucially, made successful representations to the Indian state in their quest for a viable life and the reconstruction of their livelihood in a new setting. In all their actions, such as forming temporary alliances at various points with different groups of external activists, their move towards mainstream electoral politics and in their recognition and adoption of the plains' value systems, including education and cash crops, Fattesing and Balram were the pioneers among their fellow Bhils. They reshaped the socio-economic and political values of their community across generations and ensured the successful assimilation of the hill Bhils in the plains' villages, even as they continued their livelihood as farmers like all the other Bhils. Terms such as hustlers, brokers, agents or translators are hence inadequate to cover the range of roles

they have played for their fellow Bhils. They are organic peasant intellectuals who have continued to shape the fate of their community at crucial historical junctures.

- 32 This study of the Narmada Bhils indicates that the various ST groups, arguably among the most marginal sections of Indian society, are undergoing drastic change marked by the emergence of new forms of indigenous leadership. The lives of Fattasing and Balram, however, reflect both the possibilities and limitations of the agency that an uneducated person or someone with limited education from a remote rural background and hailing from the marginal community of ST groups can realistically exercise in their efforts to make claims on the modern state in a multilingual and multiethnic setting such as South Asia. The external urban activists armed with linguistic, educational and cultural capital were familiar with the functioning of the modern state. They were conversant with the *legitimate* ways to challenge the state that included attracting widespread publicity for their efforts among the media (as well as academics) in organizing the subaltern Bhils. They showed that the state, from the petty forest guard all the way up to the elected heads sitting in the state capitals, could be effectively challenged. They did not, however, simply act as the facilitators in the movement or as the medium of contact between the rural populations and the outside world. They had their own agenda that was often at odds with those on behalf of whom they reached out to the external world. Even as they used the traditional power structure to establish themselves in the villages, their actions inadvertently produced new forms of leadership that Fattasing and Balram exemplified. It was the lack of educational and cultural capital that made the two new leaders either stick to one set of external activists or make alliances with another set periodically. The transitional nature of these linkages reflects the conscious attempt of these two Bhil leaders to maintain their independent course in the long run. Though empowered by the elite urban activists, it the very acts of defiance by Fattasing and Balram against their accidental mentors, as well as repeatedly charting a course that differed from the program of the various external activists, that most effectively highlights subaltern agency and makes them leaders with a will of their own. Unlike the external activists and supporters of the NBA-led anti-dam movement that have systematically generated a wealth of published material both in periodicals and academic journals, the story of the Bhils' struggle for resettlement remained unwritten, confined to the collective memories of the community of the remote rural area. It is, however, through the biographies of Fattasing Pawara and Balram Vasave that the quest of the Narmada Bhils for land rights and viable livelihood, whether in the hills or the plains, comes across most vividly.

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NOTES

1. Henceforth, ST.
2. NBA: also called Save Narmada Campaign.
3. Other monographs include Wood (2007); Dwivedi (2006); Caldirola and Srivastava (2005). There are several edited volumes, including Fisher (1997), Mehta (2009), several books in Hindi and Marathi languages, and many film documentaries as well.
4. For a brief mention of the role of the *karbharis* among the Bhils of Khandesh, see Patil (1989); Gare (1997). The original books are in Marathi. All Marathi translations are mine.
5. Names of persons and villages have been changed to protect their identities. The exceptions to this rule are those external activists who are identified in prior publications or who agreed to be identified.
6. PSS henceforth.
7. Date as per the handwritten copy of the application submitted on July 26, 1991 by Fattasing, along with the *karbharis* of the 12 villages, which was received by the GoM. The applicants refer to their group as "Narmada Punarwasan Samiti." Copy shared by Fattasing in August 2012.
8. For the outcome of that protest action, see Katakam 2001.
9. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Khandesh District*. Vol. XII, Henceforth GBPK.
10. For details of the various types of shifting agricultural practices in the area, see Skaria (1999:66–68).
11. Across the two ends of the Narmada valley, Kanvat in Gujarat and Khetia in Madhya Pradesh are the traditional markets that the Bhils have frequented for shopping and the sale of agriculture and forest produce for over a century.

12. The study was carried out in neighboring Madhya Pradesh villages. It is safe to conclude that the situation would have been similar in Maharashtra given the same physical terrain, poor road network and reluctance of state officials to visit the hills.
13. *Tai* is an honorific for elder sister in Marathi.
14. Dhagamvar, a lawyer and activist, worked for the land rights of the Bhils in Akkalkuwa *taluka* during the early 1970s. See Dhagamvar (2006). For details of her visit to introduce Medha Patkar, see Dhagamvar (1997). Medha Patkar describes her work in Patkar (1997).
15. Henceforth, NDS.
16. His claim is corroborated by the now-defunct Marathi weekly *Swatantra Bharat*, September 9 and 30, 1958, published from Dhule town, then a weekly, which covered Vinoba's visit.
17. A 4-page printed memorandum, in red ink and dated "April 1986," copy provided by ARCH Vahini, also Balram Vasave, both in 2012.
18. See Dabholkar (1961) on his study of cultivating crops in arid regions.
19. For details, see the autobiography of its founder leader, Datta Deshmukh, in Deshmukh (1997).
20. Manohar was part of the Shramik Sanghatana movement that had worked among the Bhils in the plains of Nandurbar; see Basu (1992).
21. Charge Handover Report, Sardar Sarovar Project Department, GoM.
22. Centre for Education and Documentation, Record Group Narmada/Sardar Sarovar, January 1989-July 1990 E21b (C). File: Anonymous. 1990. "2500 Hectares of State Forest Land for Dam Oustees." *The Independent*. Mumbai ed. June 29.
23. CED, Cf. Medha Patkar's statement in the daily *Times of India* (Mumbai edition), July 1, 1990. "Ms Medha Patkar of the Narmada Dharangrast Samiti...told reporters here yesterday...that the oustees' organizations had refused the land in 1987-88 itself, a fact which had been suppressed."
24. Anil Patel's (1997) experience in many Maharashtra villages was that the information had been held back for two years (P.86). Patel was part of a group, ARCH Vahini that had successfully fought for the resettlement of the Bhils in Gujarat since 1980, and later Maharashtra from around 1989-1995. See Nilsen (2010).
25. Cf. Ranjit Dwivedi (1998) who credits the move of the villagers to the change in the state's policy, thus denying any agency to the local Bhil leadership. If the policy change was the only reason for the Bhils accepting resettlement, all the project-affected villages should have accepted the state's offer.
26. India has a three-tier elected local self-government at the village, block and district level, that is elected by the people. Block is the unit of a district; district is the unit of a state.

ABSTRACTS

This paper studies subaltern agency and the changing nature of leadership in rural western India among the Bhil Scheduled Tribe or Adivasi group in the wake of the anti-dam movement initiated by urban middle-class activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA; also Save Narmada Campaign). Drawing on fieldwork data along with oral history, archival research, government records, vernacular records and dailies, it analyzes the politics of displacement and resettlement due to the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the River Narmada as a lived experience of two ordinary Bhil men from the submergence villages in Maharashtra state across three decades

from 1985–2016. The NBA-led movement acts as a form of political education for the two Bhils who assume leadership, displacing both traditional Bhil leaders and external activists to guide their community deftly to the resettlement colonies by making claims on the Indian state, and helping to recreate life and livelihood for themselves and their fellow Bhils in the new setting.

INDEX

Keywords: Narmada, Bhils, Sardar Sarovar Dam, social movements, subaltern, displacement, resettlement, leadership

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