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Nandhini Oza's Concern for the Tribal Welfare in *The Dam Shall Not Be Built*

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Modernist Projects

Nandhini Oza is a social worker and an NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan) activist. In "The Dam Shall Not Be Built" from *Wither Justice: Stories of Women in Prison*, she deals with the displacement of tribal societies by the intervention of modernist projects like the Sardar Sarovar Project. As Mahasweta Devi remarks:

After independence there was steady „disintegration of tribal agrarian order in India under a steady influx of non-tribal people – land hungry peasants and unscrupulous traders – accelerated by the local administration acting in collusion with the British administration.

The tribals reacted to these developments in the form of a series of uprisings in an attempt to throw out the intruders from their homeland. The process of aimed resistance and revitalization movements aimed at reconstructing tribal society continued sporadically. (Spivak xxiii)

The Sardar Sarovar

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The Sardar Sarovar Project aimed at constructing a dam across the river Narmada. Nearly 245 villages in three states – Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat were to drown in the waters in the proposed dam area and were forced to move from their villages. As only 19 villages were to be affected by the proposed dam, the government of Gujarat did not expect any serious outcry or opposition. The government of Gujarat considered it a prestigious project. But the oustees of the other two states formed a mass movement to oppose the project with the slogan:

No one shall move, the dam shall not be built. (Oza 165)

About 4500 families were forced to move out of their homeland as the State pressurized them to do so. Nandhini surveyed the villages with her fellow NBA colleagues and was able to see only

broken earthen pots, mud hearths, wrecked roof tiles, ... scattered pieces of damaged household goods. ... Their semi-broken homes accentuated the feeling of being in ghost villages. (Oza 149)

Government Apathy

The indifference of the government about the displacement of the tribals is brought out by Roy in her *The Greater Common good*:

It thinks nothing of destroying the sacred hills, and groves, the places of worship, the ancient homes of the gods and demons of the Adivasi. (Roy 114)

The Story

The protagonist, Revabai, is an Adivasi woman who lived in the village called Jamli in Gujarat. Revabai and her husband, Dedliya refused to move out like the other tribal families. The government did not succeed in evacuating the Dedliya's from Jamli.

The firm resolve of the Dedliyas inspired thirty families which were cheated at the relocation site returned to Jamli. In Jamli people lived "in harmony with the nature around" them "even intruders" (Spivak xxii) "unmindful of the rampage in the region" (Oza 152). Nandhini visited the Dedliya's and did not find them aggressive. Dedliya narrated the consequences that lead to the imprisonment of Revabai. Nandhini had met Revabai in the jail when she was imprisoned for her participation in the NBA agitation against the Sardar Sarovar Project.

Standing Up to Pressure

Nandhini learnt from Dedliya's narration of events that the police had arrested Revabai as she was considered a hindrance in their evacuation of the tribals. The determination of the Dedliya's became a source of inspiration to the other tribals. The NBA which was a formidable force to

reckon with only in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra slowly found its way into Gujarat. Revabai's assertion impressed Nandhini:

The government wants me to leave my village and is using cruel methods to scare us. But we are not going to be scared. But we are not going to move. We are not going to move. (Oza 147)

Nandhini was astonished that a tribal woman stood up for a cause way back in 1990 when Nandhini had first joined the NBA. According to Lachman Khubchandani

tribals persist with a parallel system, managing their lifestyles outside the mainstream in keeping with the kinship principles of their historical identity. (347)

The Government is Angry

The government tried to clear the nineteen villages in Gujarat swiftly as they had to meet construction and World Bank deadlines. When thirty families of Jamli refused to move out it enraged the government.

History testifies that these tribals have suffered oppression and humiliation, exploitation and backwardness for centuries at the hands of superordinate groups, be they feudal or colonial powers, ... (Khubchandani 348)

Bold Resistance and Great Risk Taking

The reservoir water was expected to drive the resisting tribals away. The determination of Dedliya family and the Jamli villagers became a source of inspiration for the other displaced tribals. "The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war" (Roy 65). Mahasweta Devi's statement throws light on the plight of tribals in India:

The history of tribals during the last sixty years is filled with stories of forced displacement, land alienation, increasing marginalization, the eruption of violence and counter-violence by the state going by any parameters of development, the tribals always figure at the tail end. (Spivak xv)

The Return of the Tribals

The families of the tribal oustees who were relocated at various other sites slowly came back to Jamli as the government had not kept its word in supporting them as promised. The Dedliya family became instrumental in enabling the NBA to oppose the government's project.

The government now targeted the Dedliya family and the repression began. The tribal women of Jamli headed by Revabai resisted deforestation. Revabai was charged with the offence of intruding into government work and a complaint was filed against her. The government was exposed as their projection of the project as a “model settlement policy” to funding agencies like World Bank proved false.

State is simply a “coercive apparatus” but can work with velvet gloves through supposedly civilizing apparatuses by means of which „the hegemony of one social group over the entire nation” is exercised. (Krishnaswami et al 103)

Easy Targets

Revabai was an easy target as she was illiterate, inarticulate, media-shy, tribal and a woman. Revabai was taken away by the police with the help of the village Sarpanch and gang-raped. She was threatened of transportation to Bombay and harassment if she continued her resistance to the government.

Rape of Nature

Nandhini allegorically hints at the rape of Nature by the intervention of developmental agencies like the Sardar Sarovar Project.

Ecocriticism finds its strongest advocates today in feminist and gender critics, who focus on the idea of place as defining social status. Of particular interest is „a woman’s place”, often described as an attic or closet that contains yet sustains individuals until they locate congenial environs Some feminists equate anatomy with geography, envisioning the female body/text as a „no man’s land” aligned against a hostile masculine world, the patriarchal settlement. (Howarth 165)

The sexual harassment of a tribal woman is used as an allegory to highlight man’s destruction of natural resources. Soper views:

If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as „female” looked at from this optic, too, the symbolization testifies to considerable confusion of thought, and its very complexity indicates some profound ambiguities about „man’s” place within and relations to the natural world. (141)

Inadequate Constitution

Nandhini raises her voice for the preservation of tribal life and culture. The Indian Government and Constitution do not have adequate policies to safeguard the tribal society and preserve its culture. Mahasweta Devi's concern for the tribals and her view is worth mentioning:

The tragedy of India at Independence was not introducing thorough land reform. A basically feudal land system was allowed to stay. A feudal land system can only nurture and sustain a feudal value system. A feudal value system is anti-women, anti-poor people, against toiling people. It is the land owners who formed the ministry, and became the rulers of the country, why should they do anything else? (Spivak xv)

Affinity between Women and Nature

According to Kate Soper, women have a close affinity to nature. A woman's 'natural' association with the domestic context (motivated by her natural lactation functions) tends to compound her potential for being viewed as closer to nature because of the animal-like nature of children, and because of the infra-social connotation of the domestic group as against the rest of society. Yet at the same time, her socializing and cooking functions within the domestic context show her to be a powerful agent of the cultural process constantly transforming raw material resources into cultural products. Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connotations with nature, she is seen as situated between the two.
(Soper 139 – 140)

Domestication and Childbearing

Women are considered to be of use only for domestication and child-bearing decorative pieces. Nandhini uses the image to depict woman as human and nature. To quote Soper:

Nature has been represented as a woman in two rather differing senses: „she“ is identified with the body of laws, principles and processes that is the object of scientific scrutiny and experimentation. But „she“ is also nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape – trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body). In both these conceptions, nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. (141)

Nandhini attacks the government for displacing the tribals and destroying their culture in the name of modernization and development. To Arundhati Roy

The millions of displaced people don't exist any more. When history is written, they won't be in it. Not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three and four times – a dam, an artillery range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. (64)

Preservation of Natural Resources

John Ruskin's advice for the preservation of natural resources can be evoked here:

To watch the corn grow, and the blossoms set; to draw hard breath over ploughshare or spade; to read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray, -- these are the things that make men happy; they have always had the power of doing these, they never will have power to do more. The world's prosperity or adversity depends upon our knowing and teaching these few things: but upon iron, or glass, or electricity, or steam, in no wise (31)

Ecofeminism

Mahasweta Devi's anger against the government and its development policies should awaken the dormant government to properly relocate the displaced tribals of the Sardar Sarovar Project.

Today if I go back, I will not find them like that. It has all been sullied, been polluted, and they are very vulnerable. ... no resistance against the cultural invasion. ... it is cultural, economic, it is connected with the land, with everything, they want to rob the tribal of everything,
(Spivak xii)

Big Dams are to Nation's „Development“ what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons governments use to control their own people. Both twentieth century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of a civilization turning upon itself. (Roy 137)

Nandhini's *The Dam Shall not Be Built* is an effort in that direction.

In an ecofeminist politics, writing has to work tirelessly in dialogue with specific issues that are not just human-centered but that mobilize both a vision of, and an attention to, specifically interconnected elements in given environments. (Cixous 152)

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