Celebrity Studies

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http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcel20

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Published online: 25 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Pramod K. Nayar (2013) Watery friction: the River Narmada, celebrity and new grammars of protest, Celebrity Studies, 4:3, 292-310, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2013.831630

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2013.831630

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Watery friction: the River Narmada, celebrity and new grammars of protest

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(Received 17 October 2012; accepted 14 November 2012)

This essay examines the construction of the River Narmada – the site of one of the largest popular protests in post-Independence India – as celebrity and cultural icon. It argues that the river’s iconicity emerges from a grammar of protest built around the friction of discourses of environmentalism and social justice. In the first section, examining the myths around the river, I propose that its iconicity lies in its cultural legibility as mother, goddess and nation. The second section turns to the rituals of protest, discourses of ecological ethnicity and spectacles of suffering. I suggest that Narmada-as-brand is the effect of the semiotics of protest that focuses less on a ‘face’ of protest than on the space of protest: the space is the face. In the conclusion, I treat the river as a chronotope. Moving beyond its immediate spatial and temporal dimensions, Narmada’s iconicity is less about being an event than a scandalous, affect-ridden process. It becomes fully celebratised when its grammar of protest appeals to the global humanitarian regimes.

Keywords: Narmada; celebrity; cultural icon; protest; grammar

The River Narmada, India’s fifth-largest, traverses three of India’s north-western states: Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, running to a total of roughly 1312 kilometres. In the 1970s, the Indian government proposed to build a series of dams along the river: 30 large dams, 135 medium dams and 3000 small dams. These were to provide, according to the government, potable water for almost 40 million people, irrigation for over six million hectares of land and hydroelectric power for the entire region. The largest of these dams, the Sardar Sarovar Project (or SSP), in the state of Gujarat alone, it was claimed, would irrigate almost 1.8 million hectares of land in Gujarat, and an additional 73,000 hectares in the mostly arid neighbouring state of Rajasthan. In 1985, the World Bank agreed to finance the SSP to the tune of approximately $450 million (Morse and Berger 1992, p. 2).

SSP has been the subject of agitation, controversy and bitter scientific–environmental, as well as state, battles since 1985. When complete, it will submerge roughly 87,000 acres of land, including agricultural land, forests, river beds and wastelands (Kothari and Ram 1994). Government estimates say at least 250,000 people will be displaced due to the dam; protestors put the figure closer to half a million. After sustained protests, the World Bank appointed an independent commission to look into the issues around Narmada, and the commission recommended that the bank withdraw from the project. World Bank funding

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consequently stopped in 1992. In 2000, however, the Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of the dam. During subsequent hearings of interlocutory petitions, the court also ordered the states to ensure that all ‘relief and rehabilitation measures have to be provided to the oustees in letter and spirit of the [Narmada Tribunal] Award and decisions of this Court’ (Order of 17 April 2006, Narmada Bachao Andolan vs Union of India). The major anti-dam campaigners – Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy and Baba Amte – have become celebrities themselves, whilst Bollywood celebrities like Aamir Khan have extended support for the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the Save Narmada Campaign). Films such as Ali Kazimi’s (1994) \textit{Narmada: a valley rises}, Anand Patwardhan’s (1995) \textit{My Narmada diary} have received critical acclaim, and inspired a greater interest in the valley’s problems.

‘Narmada’ has become a shorthand term that informs development debates in India today. The specificity of the river and its topoi rapidly fold into discourses that interrogate state policy, development, economics, human-rights agendas and environmental concerns in late-twentieth-century India. ‘Narmada’ functions as celebrity space rather than as event, a celebrity process (of resistance, occupation) rather than as an individual. Its function is almost entirely due to its iconicity, coalescing around multiple discourses and providing an instantly recognisable, culturally legible and iterable sign for several other similar processes of protest.

This essay seeks to unravel the discourses that contribute to the making of the Narmada as a cultural icon. Its iconicity, the essay demonstrates, is forged in the crucible of heavily mediated protest, and the friction between different discourses (of globalisation, local cultures, ethnic identity and development, among others). As an icon, Narmada is a celebrity in terms of the \textit{symbolic valence attached to its iterable grammar of protest}. ‘Narmada’, I propose, has acquired cultural value as an icon of protest. It now serves as a term that gathers into itself the very \textit{idea} and \textit{process} of protest. My use of the term ‘iterable’ signifies, therefore, the convenient compression into the icon, ‘Narmada’, of an entire process – ‘protest’ – even if the protests are triggered by widely different events or causes, such as nuclearisation, government indifference to a crisis or uneven development. ‘Narmada’ as sign generates, in other words, a grammar of protest, whether this grammar is of ecological ethnicity, emaciated bodies, mythification and romanticisation of the land, environmentalism or corporate greed. The grammar of protest around the river constructs Narmada as a national popular (and eventually a global) icon and therefore a readily recognisable, sign. As an icon, Narmada possesses more cultural legibility and iterability than perhaps any other – Gandhi excepted – in post-Independence India. It is this cultural legibility and iterability, I believe, that constitutes its celebrityhood. The river is now an icon because it reorganises a social imaginary. I am working with Celia Lury’s (2012, p. 254) notion of an icon here: ‘Narmada’, as a result of the cultural legibility systems engendered by and within the media, becomes the source for the elaboration of ‘the social imaginary or ground of abstraction as the possible field from which relations of similitude might be inferred’. These relations of similitude are made possible due to Narmada’s iconicity and grammar of protests that influence later protests.

Narmada’s status as a cultural icon stems from the complicated, frictioning discourses around the river and the dam. I use the term ‘icon’ here as delinked from its religious connotation, but to signify something with a significant symbolic cultural impact, although we do see interesting overlaps in the secular and the religious in much of the rhetoric around the river. Photographs such as those from the Holocaust, like those of Narmada that I examine below, not only become symbols for the ‘unimaginable’ but also structure our perceptions and receptivity to new atrocities, suggests Brink (2000, p. 135–136).

The Narmada-style protests, as we can think of them, have formed a template for protests
decades later. We can therefore see Narmada’s iconicity as iterable in new contexts of protests. As a result of the protests and the very nature of the discourses in these protests, Narmada has become, I propose, an iterable event beyond space and time, transcending the immediate contexts and concerns. The river is a celebrity, where the river, to borrow David Marshall’s phrase, ‘represents something other than itself’ as the ‘material reality of the celebrity sign [...] disappear[s] into a cultural formation of meaning’ (Marshall 1997, p. 56–57, emphasis in original). That is, Narmada’s celebrity status as cultural icon is evidenced in its continued relevance to the cultural formations that give meaning to protests and critiques in entirely new domains – whether this be the recent September 2012 protests against the Kudankulam nuclear plant in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India, or the arrival of Walmart, around which debates and agitations have occurred since the early 2000s. Narmada’s iconicity has come to generate a whole new grammar of protest, having become a part of India’s collective cultural memory and the popular imagination. (‘It [Narmada] became a debate that captured the popular imagination,’ as Arundhati Roy, Booker Prize winner and anti-dam protestor put it in her 1999 essay The greater common good.)

Celebrity studies tells us that the meaning of an icon, or star, is not only a story of the cultivation of a persona but also of the discursive and ideological context within which the persona develops (Turner 2004, p. 7). While in the case of persons, the publicity industries and the fashionable, charismatic, powerful celeb-body collaborate in the making of this persona, in the case of Narmada, clearly, the river has little by way of agency in promoting or presenting itself as a persona. There is no ‘face’ of the social and civil rebellion that is the anti-dam protests. The face with enormous affective purchase, like that of a celebrity, is (of) the river itself, its features amplified by its crude signage, deified in quasi-religious or religious iconography, the circulating images of emaciated, suffering and resisting bodies around the river, and the friction these generate when they grind against the state’s power. But mostly it is the space of the river and the figure of occupation and resistance that has iconic cultural legibility today. Being deified (‘Goddess Narmada’) and anthropomorphised (‘Mother Narmada’) certainly causes Narmada to be treated as a person, and apostrophes (addressed to the imaginary or absent ‘person’, Narmada) in the form of prayers or songs – some of which I reference in this essay – contribute significantly to the river becoming a celebrity. But Narmada-as-icon introduces a certain semantic and taxonomic consistency (due to the protests around it) across contexts (development, state power, dams, nuclear power, modernity, globalisation), events (other dams in India, refugees and displacement) and places (all over India). It is now a social-civil asset, appropriated by any and every protest campaign.

Narmada’s iconicity is firmly situated within a transmedial context. As in the case of celebrityhood, which is closely aligned, as I have argued elsewhere, with public culture and public awareness (Nayar 2009, p. 4), Narmada circulates within the domain of public and civil discourse as a readily recognisable icon. So pervasive is the semiotic universe of protest around the river that the word ‘Narmada’ has a currency matched by few protests or resistance movements in contemporary Indian classrooms (something I can vouch for as an academic), public discussions and conversations within civil society. It must also be stated that Narmada’s early stature stemmed from its fame as a space of protest but becomes a celebrity – to invoke Leo Braudy’s (1986) distinction – with the ceaseless mediation of the protests unfolding around Narmada on television screens, in newspaper coverage, in documentaries and civil society’s protest events across India, what I am terming its cultural legibility and iterablety. ‘Narmada’ is a celebrity process of protests and of occupation.
Narmada’s iconicity is constructed within two major intersecting discourses: environmentalism and social justice. The first constructs Narmada as Nature, while the second focuses on human lives and their cultures around the river. Together, these discourses construct Narmada as a social-natural landscape. The river is at once subject, materially, to human interventions and market forces, as well as to aesthetic-cultural conventions. Water, air and land are connected intimately with the human life forms and their attendant religious, agricultural and cultural practices in the environmentalist and social-justice discourses so that they become more or less seamless. These two discourses may be discerned in the myths, the visual archive of traumatised bodies, icons and rituals around Narmada and the anti-dam protests.

‘Myths’ of a river, icons of protest

The celebrity, argues Marshall, is ‘simultaneously a construction of the dominant culture and a construction of the subordinate audiences of the culture’, providing ‘a bridge of meaning between the powerless and the powerful’ (Marshall 1997, p. 48–49, although, one might add, it needn’t necessarily be that the audiences are entirely powerless). Narmada emerges as a celebritised icon precisely in the clash and coalescing of meanings and myths produced by, (i) the Indian state, including its legal system, and (ii) the subordinated, dam-displaced people and their protests. Protestors accuse the state of generating a myth of development, while the state refutes it by claiming that there is empirical evidence of prosperity accruing from dams (as demonstrated by the interviews with the project officials in Pendharkar’s 2002 film, My Narmada travels).

The first great myth – of development and modernity – around rivers and dams was inaugurated when Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, termed the dams ‘the temples of modern India’ in his speech at the opening of the Nangal Canal, 8 July 1954. This myth is primarily the one the Indian state has adopted, and may be read as the meaning generated by the dominant, or official, culture around Narmada. Since Nehru, these secular temples – mapping the secular-nationalist on to the mystical-religious – have entered the vocabulary of the nation. Indeed, as Rajagopal points out, river-development schemes inaugurated by Nehru in the late 1950s were woven into narratives of nationalism (Rajagopal 2004, p. 10–11). As a result of this inaugural myth, the Indian Supreme Court’s judgements were seen by many as pro-development and anti-traditionalist. Several reiterations of this development myth are cited in Roy’s (1999) essay. Protestors were appalled at what they saw as the court’s myth-sustaining ruling, and Arundhati Roy’s vocal criticism of the judgement instantly attracted further court action (and she was sent to prison for a day for contempt of court in 2002). Later, as we shall see, the rhetoric of political disobedience calls into question precisely this development myth that has permeated, in the protestors’ view, the legal, political, fiduciary and civil discourses around the Narmada.

Countering, and thus generating friction, the dominant or state culture’s interpretation of the dam as beneficial is the subordinated culture’s – the displaced’s – meaning-making around the Narmada. This counter-meaning treats the dam as evil, horrific and unjust, and involves a whole new set of myths.

As part of their protests, the dwellers on the bank of the river generate the second major myth around the Narmada: that of the river as mother-goddess, once again bestowing a quasi-mystical and even religious iconicity to the river. Anand Patwardhan’s film My Narmada diary shows local cultures disappearing by focusing on the drowning of a religious icon.6 One frame shows a submerged temple, with just the pinnacle visible (Part 3
of the film), signifying the destruction of local icons and symbols, and one of the villagers says, in a quiet voice, ‘[B]ut it [the temple] is still there, so we hoist a flag over it.’ Visuals of Mata Narmada (‘Mother Narmada’) convert the river into a mythic figure. She is a mother-goddess in Patwardhan’s film, and in Pendharkar’s *My Narmada travels* and in photographs of the protest.

Such a visual as this [Figure 1, from http://www.narmada.org/images.html] inscribes Narmada into an ancient Hindu tradition with two prominent cartographic rhetorics, the *index locorum* and the *index nominum*. The first, *index locorum*, is the indexing of places, and the second, the *index nominum*, is the indexing of names. The visual rhetoric *names* Narmada as a goddess and locates divinity in a *place*. The visual immediately confers a cultural legibility – Narmada as a goddess fits perfectly in with a Hinduised tradition (which of course renders it problematic in terms of the Dalits [‘outcasts’] within Hinduism, and other religious identities in post-independence India). It instantiates an entire ground of abstraction (religion, belief) even as it intervenes in this ground. By making explicit comparisons and constructing similitudes, the icon of river, worship and river-worship – Narmada in the above visual is all this – a topos constructs and enacts relations of land, people, faith and icon.

A third myth that adds to the river’s celebrity is the nature–humanity link that is ascribed a quasi-mystical value in Arundhati Roy’s (1999) rhetoric:

*They [big dams] represent the severing of the link, not just the link – the understanding – between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence.*

In her celebrated essay, Roy offers Narmada as an icon of planetary consciousness, and mythicises a perfect harmony between humans and nature. Later, she appropriates a different myth – the river as a human lover – to speak of the connection between humans and the topoi of Narmada. Anthropomorphising the rivers (her example is of the Bargi Dam in
Madhya Pradesh state), Roy writes of how the waters released without warning by the dam wash away crops and small gardens on which poor farmers depend. Roy (1999) writes, ‘Suddenly they can’t trust their river anymore. It’s like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing.’

Protestors echo Roy in their statement of this ‘connection’ of humans and nature:

When the Narmada would swell we would know rains were coming – the river and the rain were related. Now everything depends on the dam and the dam gates. The upper dams have affected the system of nature. Earlier we would know the four months when the monsoon would be here. In the third and fourth months, on full moon days, the river would swell. During the rains the river would behave just like a nala. [. . . ] Now because of the dam nothing is predictable, because the water is not flowing anymore and it depends on water released from the upper dams (cited in Routledge 2003, p. 249–250)

A song written and sung by the protestors emphatically links the riverscape with human lives, declaring ‘this nature is/gives my/me life’ as can be seen and heard in Franny Armstrong’s (2002) film Drowned out. Another protestor says in the film, ‘[T]his forest is ours. This land is ours. Narmada is ours.’ This echoes the theme song constructed around Narmada’s topoi:

Whose are the forests and the land?
Ours, they are ours.
Whose the wood, the fuel?
Ours, they are ours.
Whose the flowers and the grass?
Ours, they are ours.
Whose the cow, the cattle?
Ours, they are ours.
Whose are the bamboo groves?
Ours, they are ours.

Another displaced person, first acknowledging the drowning of houses, also focuses on the loss to nature – ‘[H]ere is such good forest, so much grass, and food and water for us’ – clearly attributing to nature the chances of a good life. In Pendharkar’s (2002) My Narmada travels, once again, the displaced point to the loss of forests – and complain that before the dam, they lived comfortably off the land.

This, the third myth around the Narmada, produces a discourse of ‘ecological ethnicity’ (Parajuli 1996) that foregrounds the ancient and intimate links between land, river and people. The emphasis on local cultures, festivals and modes of agriculture foregrounds both nature and culture, and Narmada’s cultural legibility for its readers, as in this passage from Roy (1999):

Instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed – food, fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing material – they earn between 10 and 20 rupees a day with which to feed and keep their families. Instead of a river, they have a hand pump. In their old villages, they had no money, but they were insured. If the rains failed, they
had the forests to turn to. The river to fish in. Their livestock was their fixed deposit. Without all this, they’re a heartbeat away from destitution.

This discourse of ecological ethnicity also posits the tribal as possessor of knowledge. It produces a dichotomy, as Roy does here, between local, practical and collective knowledge and the globalising, capitalist ‘modern’ knowledge (symbolised here in Roy’s prose in the hand-pump and, through the words ‘fixed deposit’, in banks). Roy’s underscoring of the immediacy of tribal experience as the source of authentic knowledge in fact proposes a bounded culture, limited, self-limiting and localised in the valley. The references to antiquarian agricultural pursuits – Roy explicitly references the gatherer stage of human revolution here in the above passage – serves as a fusion of past and present, where the past is valued. Such a myth-making as Roy’s clearly positions ‘local knowledge [...] as a panacea for sustainability’, as Anja Nygren (1999, p. 268) terms it in her study of local knowledge discourses.

The second and third myths might be seen as constituting the popular because they contest the appropriation of Narmada and the dam as modern, in that the river is seen as ancient and local, while the dam is seen as embodying the ‘culture of the powerful’ (Stuart Hall, cited in Marshall 1997, p. 45). The poster for the Narmada movement (Figure 2, from http://www.narmada.org/images.html) invites this interpretation when it calls upon us to ‘celebrate people’s history’.

This is Narmada as Modern India, Narmada as Mother Nature and Narmada as Goddess, where the iconicity lies in its cultural legibility as mother, goddess and nation. But myths alone do not constitute celebratisation, and Narmada has generated its own rituals of protest, stereotypes and, following Lury (2012), social imaginary.

Rituals, cultural stereotypes and protest

Besides these various myths of the Narmada that are appropriated into the discourses of protest, using and representing the river-text as both nature and culture, are the rituals and stereotypes that have captured the protest imaginary of the nation as a whole. If connotation relies on a mass of intertextual detail (Marshall 1997, p. 58), we see in the protestors’ rhetoric scientific reports, newspaper coverage, human-interest personal stories and emotional social drama, much of it captured in Patkar’s and Roy’s rhetoric.

In 2002 the protestors, led by Medha Patkar (one of the most visible faces of the Narmada movement), stood submerged in water to draw attention to their imminent condition should the Sardar Sarovar dam be built to its full height. See the visual records of this protest at http://www.narmada.org/images/satyagraha2002/index.html. A decade later, the news reports carried a horrific visual. Protestors at Khandwa in the state of Madhya Pradesh submerged themselves in water in what they called ‘Jal Satyagraha’ or ‘water protest’. The published photograph showed the protestors being carried off, after 17 days of protest, their soles cracked and skins peeling off their bones (‘A cry from the sole’, 13 September 2012, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/a-cry-from-the-sole/article3891189.ece). NDTV news channel’s website described the protestors thus: ‘[T]heir bodies shrivelled, covered with rashes and with their skin peeling’. We see embodied in the visual a new grammar of protest emerging from anti-dam protests around the Narmada being appropriated elsewhere, circulating independent of contexts, and Narmada’s resultant conversion into a social-civil asset. Indeed, in September 2012 this unique form of protest was adopted by those objecting to the Kudankulam nuclear project, thus suggesting the dissemination of an entire grammar of protest originating in the events.
in the Narmada Valley. A significant point about the grammar of these protests developed out of the Narmada and the Khandwa visuals engages us here: one or two faces stare at the camera and what we perceive is the extent and numbers of several others, deep into the visual field of the photographs. Narmada’s iconicity, it would seem, lies in the iterability of its lexicon and not just its grammar.

During the 1990 protests, Gandhian protestor Baba Amte tied the hands of the protestors before they embarked on the march so that none of them would be tempted
to strike back should they be beaten down by the police in the course of their protests (cited in Gadgil and Guha 2009, p. 386). Recalling the anti-colonial struggle of Mahatma Gandhi that foregrounded non-violence – a sign with the highest cultural legibility and iterability, and one that gave the incipient nation then and later post-independence India an additional grammar of protest – the ‘ritual’ of binding hands and self-sacrifice is now part of the Narmada protest imaginary, just as the water protest is. Persistent rituals of this sort also rely upon stereotypes, and the Narmada protests are no different here.

The most enduring cultural stereotype around the dam and the river has been that of an indifferent modernity represented in the characters of the Indian state, the SSP and the World Bank and their representatives. Seizing upon the state’s callous treatment of both nature and local cultures, and its rejection of all local knowledge, the stereotype of the Narmada as tribal/aboriginal extends the myth of the human–nature harmony (a myth not entirely without foundation, one hastens to add). It generates a discourse of ecological ethnicity around tribal life, an ethnicity about to be destroyed by the ‘modernising’ Indian state. Once again, conflating the Narmada topoi as both Nature and Culture, we see in the antagonistic stereotyping – ecological ethnicity versus indifferent modernity – an important component of the cultural iconicity of the river.

Much of the ritualising and stereotyping engages, as noted above, with both Nature and Culture, although the antagonistic stereotyping – in order to generate the required buzz around displacement and the human costs of big dams – shifts the focus marginally towards tribal culture and underscores its ecological ethnicity. By focusing on the hegemonic modernity of the dam constructed by Hall’s ‘culture of the powerful’ – which in Patkar’s rhetoric now includes the law – the protest rhetoric also makes the global–local friction, at the level of the river and tribal cultures, a productive site of disobedience (Patkar 1999).

When the state has, under the principle of eminent domain, full right to resources, the state is expected to act in favour of the most disadvantaged communities and use the resources in such a way that the common good would be really achieved, of course, within the value frame work [sic] of equality and justice. [...] Instead the state is using its power, its laws, ways and means, its police force, a physical brutal force, to take away the resources. [...] That is like a privatized state, which is privatized by those small elite sections, and this is being done more and more and more brutally and crudely, in the new context of globalization and liberalization.8

Patkar’s rhetoric of ‘political disobedience’ (Harcourt 2012) singles out political concepts (equality, justice), entities (the state, communities), apparatuses of power (the law) and contexts (local people, globalisation, liberalisation), and combines the discourse of environmentalism and that of social justice – or of Nature and Culture, in other words. This is the ‘friction’ (to use Anna Tsing’s term) where local interests and concerns come up against global forces and the state and bleeds (Tsing 2007). ‘Friction’ here is the contest and confluence of discourses around the Narmada. When Patkar, Roy and the campaigners provide the buzz of humanitarian and ecological disaster, their discourse rubs up against the state’s discourse of development (echoed by business houses), generating the friction – which we must note implies always a co-presence – that makes the icon. Narmada is at the intersection and interconnection of these (stereotyped) forces. Shifting from civil to political disobedience makes the Narmada protests a political project because, as Patkar’s and Roy’s rhetoric demonstrates, the actions of those displaced by the dam ‘resists the very way in which [...] [the people] are governed. It rejects the idea of honoring or expressing the “highest respect for law”. It refuses to willingly accept the sanctions meted out by the legal
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The dam now comes to mean the tyranny of the state machinery and capital, all embedded within an indifferent modernity that rejects local values and beliefs. Narmada’s cultural legibility might be tracked to precisely this: the dam represents a larger crisis of Indian politics and polity, and thus moves beyond the immediate spatial and geographical setting.

The Narmada also becomes a celebrity topos because of the number and type of people displaced (‘PAPs’, or ‘project-affected people’, as these displaced are called) due to its waters. In this discourse of social justice, protestors elide the ecological effects of the dam to focus on the quantity and quality of human suffering. Therefore, Narmada also acquires a celebrity status – or notoriety – as the cause of human suffering. This discourse of social justice was inaugurated, historically, in the 1978 report of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal.

The tribunal’s report was one of the first to define the ‘oustee’, the person displaced by the dam:

An ‘oustee’ shall mean any person who since at least one year prior to the date of publication of the notification under Section 4 of the Act, has been ordinarily residing or cultivating land or carrying on any trade, occupation, or calling or working for gain in the area likely to be submerged permanently or temporarily.

Using this as a starting point, activists began speaking less of the river than the ‘communities of suffering’ (Pérouse de Montclos’ (2005) term for the discursive construction of refugees) produced by the river: ensuring that a whole segment of the human species was now identified as the ‘Narmada displaced’. The discourse gathered strength through World Bank reports. In 1980, the bank’s general resettlement policy declared that ‘upon resettlement, displaced persons should regain at least their previous standard of living’ (Berger 1993, p. 40). It later also issued directives (Nos. 4.20 and 4.30) that set out parameters for the resettlement of indigenous people (Narula 2008, p. 357).

Using the people and the idea of justice as a factor another anti-dam activist, Baba Amte, wrote in his booklet Narmada bachhao (Save the Narmada), ‘Today the Narmada valley has become the arena for a new imagination and creativity, for a society in which there must be sufficiency for all before there is superfluity for some’. And Narmada’s celeb campaigner, Arundhati Roy, would state:

[R]esettling 200,000 people in order to take (or pretend to take) drinking water to forty million – there’s something very wrong with the scale of operations here. This is Fascist maths. It strangles stories. Bludgeons details. And manages to blind perfectly reasonable people with its spurious, shining vision.

The human cost of the dam has been very well documented. Again, Roy:

In several resettlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds which, during the monsoon, turn into fast-flowing drifts. I’ve been to some of these ‘sites’. I’ve seen film footage of others: shivering children, perched like birds on the edges of charpains, while swirling waters enter their tin homes. Frightened, fevered eyes watch pots and pans carried through the doorway by the current, floating out into the flooded fields, thin fathers swimming after them to retrieve what they can.

When the waters recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhoea, sick cattle stranded in the slush. The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable.
Forty households were moved from Manibeli to a resettlement site in Maharashtra. In the first year, thirty-eight children died . . .

Critics of the dam foreground the habitations, lives and cultural practices of the people around the river. Here is an instance of this component of the cultural discourse on Narmada:

The link between nature and society is central to the religious belief of the adivasis of the hills. [. . .] For Bhilalas, affecting nature’s cycle is intrinsic to a cosmology that imbues all natural phenomena with spiritual life, so that the hills, trees, stones and crops actively intervene in people’s daily life. The conjunction of the natural, spiritual and social worlds can be seen in the collective performance of the most important Bhilala ritual – indal pooja (the worship of the union of the rain and earth which brings forth grain). [. . .] The gayana, creation myth sung during indal, links the origin of the world to the river Narmada. Adivasis refer to the river as Narmada mata (mother) . . . (Baviskar 1995, p. 90–91, emphasis in original)

These moments, like the visuals of submerged and damaged bodies, are spectacles of suffering that acquire iconic status. Writing about magician-illusionist David Blaine’s spectacles, Anita Biressi (2004) speaks of his traumatised body as spectacle. The bystanders and witnesses to these bodies transform the suffering body into spectacle, for having suffered, endured, survived or been threatened. The theatre of protest acquires, through the camera’s visualisation of traumatised bodies in Narmada, the status of a theatre of extraordinary bodies. The suffering Adivasi, exoticised for this suffering, is made a spectacle of on screen and in print-media visuals. It is their tribe’s or community’s suffering that marks them, and especially their bodies, as readily identified bodies. The danger written into the visual narrative in these cases contributes to the celebritisation of suffering bodies, which then quickly enters the grammar of protest. Patwardhan’s film consistently focuses on the interdependences and connections between tribal peoples and the ecology of the river. The film also tells us how, as a result of the dam construction, tree-felling and deforestation has proceeded at a rapid pace. Adivasis, the victims say, are held responsible for this. As one tribal points out in Part 2 of the film, before the dam there were no roads into the forests and so nobody felled the trees. The tribes had no trucks to take the timber away. But now, with the roads for the dam, more vehicles come in and the trees are cut by contractors and taken away. So Patwardhan first shows how landscape is social (created, modified) within human projects and ‘natural’ (outside of human control and intervention), and second, shows how species – in this immediate example, trees – are connected to markets, the economy and cultural attention. Patwardhan thus points to the stereotype of an exploitative culture – capitalism, science and technology, the state – that damages the Nature that the tribals have always lived with/in. While admittedly a romantic-idealist view of the Adivasi–Nature linkage, the film draws attention to the ecocide that ‘development’ of this kind entails. The SSP, says the voiceover, ‘force[s] forest-dependant Adivasis into leaving their lands’.

The film also shows local cultures disappearing. In Part 2, the film focuses on the World Bank visit to India. Mr Preston of the World Bank refuses to meet Patkar and sends word that any message she or the NBA might have might be sent to him. Patkar informs the tribals accompanying her that Mr Preston has no time for them because he is at a fashion show. By constructing this dichotomy of cultures, Patwardhan’s film institutes a politics of First-World capitalism versus Third-World dissent of the poor. Similarly, Patwardhan shows (in Part 4) how it is only the Gujarat business class and politicians who support the dam, because it would directly profit Gujarat with irrigation possibilities, help
agri-business and industry. The Gujarat government therefore has labelled Narmada and the project ‘the lifeline of Gujarat’.\(^{15}\)

The documentary also points to the inadequacy of binaries such as forests versus farms, development versus primitive culture, and nature conservation versus human livelihood, because it is impossible to distinguish these binaries in the *Adivasi* way of life in the ecosystem of the Narmada. Pendharkar, for instance, opens with a reference to the tribes of the Narmada as an ‘untouched people’, thus exoticising them through a distancing in time, even as the development project violently pulls them into global recognition. By referring to them as ‘untouched people’, Pendharkar also bestows upon them a certain vulnerability, and therefore constructs them as the subordinated cultures that battle the dominant one of capitalism and development. Her rhetoric also illustrates the point made above via Marshall (1997), that the celebrity emerges as a bridge between the subordinated and dominant cultures. Clearly, then, we see the two meanings – the dam as beneficial, generated by/from the dominant culture of the state, and the dam as evil, generated by the ‘subordinated’ cultures of the displaced – converge around Narmada.

The *Adivasis*, as is clear from the protests, recognise these binaries, but do not consider them as part of their everyday life on the banks of the river, choosing to retain them as the rhetoric of leaders or politicians. In other words, none of the above supposedly universal environmental or development binaries and concepts have any local purchase. The *Adivasi* life as documented by these narratives also blurs the gap between ‘domesticated’ and ‘wild’, where the practices of farming, food-gathering and animal-rearing constantly move between the two (administrative) categories. Foraging continues as always, and there is also some domestication and agriculture: ‘jungle, farm, fodder’, as one villager tells Pendharkar. Thus we need to see the Narmada ecological ethnicity as natureculture where the discourses of nature and culture do not introduce an artificial split between ‘domesticated’ and ‘wild’. The human–non-human interactions produce a social landscape.

Narmada’s ecology becomes a celebrity in part because, as Turner would say about celebrities in general, it serves as a ‘location for the interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity’ (Turner 2004, p. 24). If Patkar foregrounds the cultural difference between Mr Preston and the displaced, Patwardhan’s film uses the *Adivasi* way of life as a starting point to question the culture of big dams. The NBA’s initial stand was ‘rehabilitation before construction’, but eventually veered towards ‘no construction’. When the discourse divides between social justice and the environment, Narmada is seen as an instance where the dam’s construction has been unfair to both, while supposedly serving the cause of select people (the farmers who are to gain water resources once the dams are complete). Thus when Gail Omvedt\(^ {16}\) critiqued Roy’s essay for ignoring the *Dalit* farmers who needed water and proposed that the dam be regulated in a decentralised manner, Ashish Kothari quickly shifted focus to the environmental consequences:

\begin{quote}
**EVEN IF A LARGE DAM CAN BE MADE TO WORK, AS MS. OMVEDT SAYS, IN A ‘DECENTRALISED’ MANNER AS FAR AS ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONING GOES, THERE IS NO WAY IT CAN BE ENVIRONMENTALLY DECENTRALISED.** It inevitably means a large-scale disruption of the river system, with inevitable large-scale impacts upstream, downstream, and at the river mouth. [emphasis in original]\(^ {17}\)
\end{quote}

What we see here is the ‘integrating function’ of the celebrity river, bringing together NGOs, celebrity authors, government officials, students and non-resident Indians like Pendharkar to argue over its meaning and role.
The integrating function of the sign may be traced to Narmada’s frictional discourses that then invest the river as the ‘face’ of multiple aspirations, ambitions, feuds and ideologies. An icon, says Bishnupriya Ghosh (2010, p. 337) in her reading of anti-Coca-Cola protests in Kerala, India, ‘activates a distinctive semiotic economy that lends itself to forging social bonds – to unifying a popular through signification’. Narmada-as-icon becomes, then, the vanguard of a national popular through its transmedial presence (evidenced by the large numbers of metropolitan students who joined the protests across India), cultural legibility and iterability. Even subaltern cultural productions such as the visuals from the Narmada protests now acquire a greater iterability, and therein lies Narmada’s iconicity. In its iterability, it intervenes in the social imaginary, producing similitudes and generating inferences (about state policy, for instance) and inducing continuity in movement, which, according to Lury (2012, p. 256–257), is what constitutes a brand as a brand). So Narmada merges into Khandwa merges into Kundankulam. At the centre of this set of changing relations and dynamics of people and the state, people of this region and people of that region, India and the world, is an icon generating a chain of inferences. A world of protest, anger and resistance, to paraphrase Lury, is being brought into the world.

One further point. The Narmada grammar of protest did not generate a ‘face’ of a revolution. Although, as noted earlier, Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy are the most visible faces of the protests, I would argue that it is the river itself that acquires the iterability and recognisability as icon. Here it might be productive to treat the Narmada protests as being less about the ‘face’ of a revolution (as Gandhi was for India’s anticolonial struggle or Nelson Mandela for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa) than the space of a struggle. I turn here to Mitchell’s (2012, p. 9) reading of the Occupy campaigns. Mitchell proposes that the Occupy campaigns lacked a ‘definite form or figure other than the dialectical poles of the mass and the individual, the assembled crowd and the lone, anonymous figure of resistance’. Despite Patkar and Roy, it is the space of the Narmada that attracts attention. The Narmada protests were also about occupation – of traditional dwellings and land – in the face of imminent state eviction, arrests and submergence. This is the translation of the space of the river as the space of resistance: the river is ‘occupied’, in one sense. Anonymous individuals and the masses of protestors perform, in Mitchell’s terms’ an ‘occupatio’, ‘taking the initiative in a space where one knows in advance that there will be resistance and counterarguments’ (Mitchell 2012, p. 10). The submerged bodies in the pictures and the map of India constitute a remarkable sign of ‘occupy’ as well as evidence the ‘watery friction’ of my title. Water occupies homes, lands and lives. By submerging themselves, voluntarily, in the waters of the Narmada, the anonymous resisters assist in their own drowning and thus resist the state’s displacement or forced drowning.

**Conclusion: chronotope and celebrity**

The seamless folding of the discourses of environmentalism and social justice, of nature and culture within the popular myths, and of protest rhetoric and state stereotyping converts Narmada into a chronotope that then becomes a celebrity icon, ironically transcending time and space. A chronotope, in Bakhtinian (1982, p. 84) terms, is a narrative strategy in literary writing where ‘time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history’. It links people, a community, with places and events, fuses their past, present and future, which Bakhtin (1982, p. 85) terms ‘the simultaneous existence in literature of phenomena taken from widely separate periods of time’, even as it localises these events in terms of spatiality.
In the case of the Narmada protests, if on the one hand these discourses perform the ecological ethnicity of the area, on the other they seek to move beyond the river’s immediate topoi, and thus produce the ‘Narmada chronotope’. It is in this metamorphosis that Narmada finally becomes fully celebratised.

Narmada has been globalised. And this globalisation is double-edged. On the one hand it embodied, until such time as the World Bank was involved, the ways in which local resources, people and topoi became the object of global attention, exploitation and engagement. On the other, Narmada was transformed into a cultural media icon that stood for similar exploitative ‘globalisations’ of the local. Just as, in the case of a brand, the logo or sign is eventually separated from its origins, and even from the original product, Narmada is mediated into a brand that has, since the late 1990s, stopped being about the object (Narmada), events (dam construction) and place (the valley) and instead now serves as an ‘effect’: of the origin-ary protests and contexts but useable to denote globalisation. It moves away from the local (the Narmada valley), through its insertion into heavily meditated discourses against globalisation, and becomes a free-floating signifier to be appropriated by any social-civil protest against globalisation in contemporary India. Patkar in Patwardhan’s film makes this globalising move when she says that Manibeli (one of the first villages to be submerged) and its protests are not solitary: that, wherever in the world there are poor and oppressed people, and ‘right-thinking’ people, these protests will resonate. The battle against the SSP, says Patkar crucially, should not be restricted to the Adivasis alone. Thus Narmada makes the transition from a local problem into a national and global concern. Its ecological ethnicity becomes the starting point for an affective cosmopolitanism and transnational solidarity.

The anti-dam protests have been projected as ‘symbolic of a global struggle for social and environmental justice’, and the NBA as a ‘symbol of hope for people’s movements all over the world that are fighting for just, equitable, and participatory development’, as the group Friends of River Narmada put it. The noted environmental historian Mahesh Rangarajan declared that ‘the NBA put the issues of displacement on the agenda in India and at the global level’ (quoted in Narula 2008, p. 368, emphasis added) and that, despite the dam being eventually finished, the entire campaign has ‘put the costs of the development agenda under the microscope’ in a manner that ‘will continue to have a major impact on public culture’ (quoted in Narula 2008, p. 368). Globally it has garnered international media attention for some time, including an invitation to Patkar to testify at a US Congressional hearing, and the Right Livelihood Award from the Swedish Right Livelihood Foundation. In the USA, 27 transnational NGOs organised a Stop Sardar Sarovar campaign. Full-page adverts about the SSP appeared in the New York Times (21 September 1992), the Financial Times (21 September 1992) and The Washington Post (21 September 1992). Patkar was also a part of the deliberations of World Commission on Dams. Patkar’s discourse of skewed globalisation has another aspect that brings a different iconicity to Narmada.

Narmada’s moral stories also frequently invoke the immoral nature of development policies that initiate humanitarian crises such as the loss of livelihood, dwellings and community links, or what I referenced earlier as the cultural legibility and iterability of Narmada in the context of critiques of development. It is possible, I suggest, to make a case for Narmada becoming an icon for scandal. Scandals, as we know in the case of celebrities, thrive in the mass media because they deal with the moral values, anxieties or fantasies of the people as a whole (Bird 2003, p. 32). When Patkar, Roy and others propose the global value of the Narmada protests, they project the scandal of Third-World development as a
larger thematic that must concern people in all parts of the world. They appeal to a ‘global imagination’ – a ‘collective way of seeing, understanding and feeling [. . .] via an ongoing process of symbolic construction of the real and the possible in image and narrative’ (Orgad 2012, p. 3) – of similar scandals and disasters, and thus forge a link with the rest of the planet. Narmada’s iconicity, whose origins in the friction of discourses, it might be assumed, are now public knowledge, is carefully emplotted within the media representations in what can be called the ‘marketization of humanitarian practice’ (Chouliaraki 2013, p. 6). Focusing on scandalous policies, Narmada’s grammar of protest appeals to more than just development experts: it appeals to the global humanitarian regimes. Expanding and extending beyond its immediate spatial and temporal dimensions, Narmada’s iconicity is less about being an event than a scandalous, affect-ridden process.

The river functions as a chronotope where time (ancient, or the time of the tribals’ forefathers, and the present, or the present-day threat of the dam) and space (of the hills, river and the under-construction dam) merge into a continuum. It also becomes a chronotope in another, more fascinating way: the villagers stand submerged in the river, determined to drown – Jal Samarpan (‘sacrifice by drowning’) – in their beloved river rather than shift. The submerged protest marks an interesting addition to the discourse on the idea of a ‘return to nature’. During the course of a discussion with Pendharkar regarding the value of this protest, one volunteer, Arundhati, recalls similar sacrifices made by volunteers during the Indian freedom struggle. The appeal to history and traditions of dissent and protest once again construct Narmada as a chronotope. Arundhati in fact states that, but for those early sacrifices, the present dissent would not have been possible. Pendharkar speaks in ecological-ethnic terms of the adivasis’ ‘age-old way of life’. Another resident of a soon-to-be-submerged village speaks to Pendharkar of 12 generations of his family that lived on the same piece of land.

This celebritised chronotope has a particular purchase in the present. The social movement around the Narmada demonstrates how the hegemony of the development programme can be rattled (although not yet fully unsettled, since the Supreme Court of India in 2000 ruled in favour of the dam at its original full height). Taking recourse to ancient connections, natureculture tropes and concepts, the chronotope disrupts the linear narrative that runs from primitivism to development. The chronotope also marks the interactions of the local with the global: the local environment campaign taking on a project funded for a time with global finance represented by the World Bank.

This is the ‘friction’ of my title: the engagement of ecological ethnicity with globalised movements, of local interests with global concerns but also of multiple time frames, ancient and contemporary. We see this friction in, for instance, the World Bank’s independent review, which recommended that the bank stop funding the dam. This is what the review says:

We think the Sardar Sarovar Projects as they stand are flawed, that resettlement and rehabilitation of all those displaced by the Projects is not possible under prevailing circumstances, and that environmental impacts of the Projects have not been properly considered or adequately addressed. Moreover we believe that the Bank shares responsibility with the borrower for the situation that has developed. [. . .] We have decided that it would be irresponsible for us to patch together a series of recommendations on implementation when the flaws in the Projects are as obvious as they seem to us. As a result, we think that the wisest course would be for the Bank to step back from the Projects and consider them afresh. (Morse and Berger 1992, p. 8)

People and the land are both the key pivots for the bank’s eventual pull-out from the project.
As a chronotope, Narmada enables different ways of speaking, different worldviews and ideologies, very often in productive friction with each other. It is a chronotope for the movement of plot, history, time and state policy. It unifies time and space, and protest. The riverscape embodies, to adapt Bakhtin on the chronotope, places ‘where time and space intersect and fuse’ and where, as noted earlier, locality is temporal and time is localised. The Narmada chronotope reinstates the antiquity of tribal life (especially, as noted earlier, when writers like Arundhati Roy valorise the ‘primitive’ gatherer mode of sustenance of the tribals), the omniscient river, the flows of contemporary global capital and state power, and embodies these in folkloric songs and protest rhetoric. Thus geographic features often remind people of ancient moral stories and truths, and much of the discourse around Narmada consciously links people, time, topography and events from the past and drags them into the present.

A celebrity ought to, if Graeme Turner is to be believed, interrogate and elaborate cultural identities. This is what Narmada achieves in its iconicity. Pro-dam advocates see the dam as iconic of a developing, modern India, and anti-dam protestors see it as anti-people and as a symbol of India’s growing selfish, capitalist and corporatised development, its indifferent modernity. By merging discourses, time frames and the local with the global, Narmada is celebratised. This globalisation of both capitalist modernity (in the state’s vision for/of the SSP) and protest (in the anti-dam voices) seems to approximate to the new turn to critical thought itself, driven by the crisis of global warming, towards universalising differential experiences of ecological threat and disaster that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) speaks of. Narmada instantiates, I suggest, such a turn. As a shorthand term for the friction of state discourses, environmentalism and humanitarian disaster, Narmada’s grammar of protests has impacted, like any celebrity (Nayar 2009, p. 29), the cultural economy in Indian civil society, generating furious debates about the state’s role, corporate greed and civil responsibilities. Its influence on latter-day protests remains to be studied, even as its iconicity has only intensified its valence with each reiteration.

This is Narmada’s story.

Notes
2. I am adapting the idea of a secular icon from Vicky Goldberg, via Cornelia Brink (2000).
3. This is Goldberg’s (in Brink 2000, p. 136–137) definition of a secular icon:

   I take secular icons to be representations that inspire some degree of awe – perhaps mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration – and that stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs. Although photographs easily acquire symbolic significance, they are not merely symbolic, they do not merely allude to something outside themselves . . . for photographs intensely and specifically represent their subjects. But the images I think of as icons almost instantly acquired symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endowed them with national or even worldwide significance. They concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history. They seem to summarise such complex phenomena as the powers of the human spirit or of universal destruction.

5. Michael Taussig (2012, p. 75–76) writing about Occupy signage argues that it is in the ‘hand-madeness of the signs, their artisanal crudity, art before the age of mechanical and digital reproduction’ that produces its ‘talismanic function, an incantatory drive’.


18. Mikhail Bakhtin (1982, p. 84) defined the chronotope thus:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.

I see the chronotope as the effect of discourse – literary or non-literary (what Bakhtin terms ‘other areas of culture’ in the above passage). My sense of the chronotope is therefore a set of narrative modes where the account of a place fuses time, history and the topography in powerful tropes whereby any focus on spatial arrangements would automatically direct attention to temporality (such as history) and attention to the movement of time would involve recognising spatial locations.

19. Lury (2012) writes that the brand ‘makes available for appropriation aspects of experience of product use as if they were effects of the brand’. Frow therefore proposes that the brand is indivisible from the product. In this same way, Narmada protests do not any more have any original connection with the locale, object or event of the protests. Instead, Narmada is an effect that seems to circulate independent of the historical object.


Notes on contributor

Pramod K Nayar’s most recent books include Frantz Fanon (Routledge 2013), Posthumanism (Polity 2013), Digital Cool (Orient BlackSwan 2013), Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire (Wiley-Blackwell 2012) and Writing Wrongs: The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India (Routledge 2012), besides essays on posthumanism (Modern Fiction Studies), Indian travel writing (New Zealand Jl. of Asian Studies, South Asian Review) and graphic novels (Hungarian Journal of American and English Studies, South Asian Film and Media). He is currently working at the Postcolonial Studies Dictionary and a book on surveillance. He is often seen reading superhero comics in his office.
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