WRITTEN ON THE BODY, WRITTEN ON THE LAND

VIOLENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES IN CENTRAL INDIA

Amita Baviskar

INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
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Amita Baviskar
Department of Sociology, University of Delhi

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INTRODUCTION

The inherently violent effects of capitalist state practice are writ large on Southern peoples and landscapes (Alvares 1992). Small peasants, tribal groups, poor women, and the lands and forests they live and work with, are the reluctant subjects of ‘development’, a process which employs new technologies and ideologies to exploit vulnerable social groups and the natural base which sustains them, even as it claims to improve both. New and accelerated modes of extraction which seek to control nature through river valley projects or forestry schemes are justified in terms of causes such as the ‘national interest’ and ‘biodiversity conservation’. These causes are so transcendental that only the omniscient state claims the authority to safeguard them. The union of politics and violence is thus informed by the myth of the state. This myth is created through a constitutive split between the ‘profane’ dimensions of the state, its incoherence, brutality and the banality of governance, and the ‘sublime’ qualities attributed to the state, the illusion that it serves higher forms of rationality. Social groups within the nation-state who challenge the state’s monopoly over the determination of ‘national interest’ and ‘conservation’ have to struggle to establish alternative bases for their legitimacy.

Such legitimacy may be derived from the discourse of development itself. In the words of James Scott, ‘a hegemonic ideology must, by definition, represent an idealization, which therefore inevitably creates the contradictions that permit it to be criticized in its own terms’ (Scott 1985: 315) (italics in original). ‘Development’ is also ostensibly about increasing human welfare, empowerment and the exercise of democratic freedoms, and about establishing sustainable and just ways of using the physical and biological environment. This idealization, coupled with the experience of exploitation,

1. I am grateful to my colleagues Deepak Mehta and N. Harish for helping me work my way through this essay. I would like to thank the participants on the workshop on ‘Violence and the Environment’ for their suggestions and comments. The usual caveats apply.


I have chosen to use the actual names of people and places in this paper. Some readers may feel that fictitious names should have been substituted to protect the privacy of individuals, especially those women who were raped. Since all the events and persons referred to here have entered the public domain and have been widely displayed by the media, their identities are already visible. At this point it serves no purpose to avoid real names.

2. The state’s claims of being the sole authority are also contested through international discourses around development and the environment (see Ferguson 1994).

3. I am grateful to Deepak Mehta for suggesting this formulation.
creates the possibility of a politics of resistance that combines conflict with collaboration, criticizing the state even while engaging in dialogue and negotiating with it. That is, the ‘sublime’ dimension of the state makes it possible for ordinary people to interpret dispersed experiences of being governed as meaningful signs of a larger, ordered system. Strategies of resistance are typified by what Levi-Strauss, speaking of myth-making, calls *bricolage*—the use of a heterogenous repertoire of resources (Levi-Strauss 1966: 17). Increasingly, we see a tendency for such a repertoire to draw upon globally circulated knowledges, modes of organization and institutions (Broısius 1999).

The myth of a ‘sublime’ state, an idealization that creates its own dissonance, is continually contested. However, more difficult questions arise from the fact that ‘every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness’ (Bourdieu 1977: 164). State violence is routinized by the constitution of social categories—those who can legitimately use violence, those against whom violence can be legitimately used. The state also leads in defining the context where violence is justified; the definition of a conflict as a ‘law and order problem’ becomes a step towards its suppression. By shaping definitions and assumptions, the state seeps into cultural codes, making it difficult to ask certain questions or think certain thoughts. Those who seek to shatter this consensus mobilized by the state, endeavour to make visible violence that is implicit. This new visibility challenges three aspects of state power that were earlier taken for granted and accepted as manifestations of authority. One, it exposes the violence embedded in categorizations of tribe, caste and gender and the attribution of ‘natural’ qualities to these groups (the ‘wildness’ of tribes, or the ‘promiscuity’ of tribal women, for instance). Two, it highlights the violence inherent in processes such as the colonial classification of lands and forests, and the displacement which accompanies development. Three, it criticizes the selective abuse of the punitive power of the state against peaceful demonstrators, in ‘encounter’ killings, custodial torture, and more insidious acts of surveillance and defamation.

The attempt by social movements to shift perceptions from violence-as-normal to violence-as-pathological, and to move from the banal routine of development-as-domination to a collective resistance against state violence, invites further violence in the form of state repression. If the new strategies of resistance are effective in challenging established modes of state discipline they are answered by fresh violence. Yet there are variations in the response of the state to collective resistance. This paper describes two contemporary social movements around issues of the environment and development in central India. These movements have simultaneously challenged the state, but have met with strikingly different responses from it. What has enabled one movement, the Maheshwar anti-dam struggle, to negotiate state violence more effectively than the other movement, the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan [Organization for Tribal Liberation]?

This paper argues that the ‘arts of resistance’ seem to be more successful if a struggle manages to represent itself as an ‘environmental movement’ within a framework recognized by certain globalized audiences. Claims to environmentalism are more likely to be accepted if they fit into a pre-existing template of ‘green politics’ as developed in the North over the last three decades. However, Southern movements have enlarged this template and expanded the ‘green agenda’ by demonstrating the convergence between subsistence livelihood practices and environmental sustainability (Guha and Martinez-Alieır 1998: 3-21). Where Southern movements have not been able to prove beyond doubt that their practices are ecologically sustainable, they have at least shown that their use of natural resources is less degrading than that of anyone else, especially the state’s. That is, minimally, Southern
movements claim to be ‘environmentalists by default’ (Baviskar 1995: 239). Strategically, besides invoking one’s own ecological superiority, a claim to environmentalism is more likely to succeed if it also creates ecological genealogies. That is, a social movement must be able to represent its subjects as ‘natural’ communities with virtuous ancestries. It must convert fluid identities into primordial and unitary categories; tribes, women or peasants, all must appear to be internally undifferentiated and uniformly opposed to the state. Where such unified representations cannot be created, resistance is more vulnerable to challenge and violent repression by the state. Through an account of two ‘environmental’ struggles in Madhya Pradesh (MP), a state in central India, this paper discusses: 1) how social movements move violence from the realm of the ‘normal’ to the ‘pathological’; 2) how the state seeks to absorb, explain and otherwise neutralize accounts of its own pathology; and 3) how the process of challenging state hegemony entails entering into the dual modes of conflict and collaboration. The essay compares the different responses meted out to the two movements by the state. It argues that, in the case of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, the failure to prove ecological superiority and to mobilize unitary communities severely compromised the movement, enabling the state to unleash brutal violence against it. On the other hand, the Maheshwar anti-dam movement was able to tap a globalized discourse on dams and the environment that gave it the legitimacy necessary to deflect state violence.

As used here, ‘the state’ specifically refers to the government of Madhya Pradesh. This complex entity nests within the federal system of Indian states (provinces) under the rubric of the central Union government. It consists of changing elected representatives to the legislature as well as permanently appointed members of the bureaucracy. Historically, except for brief periods when the rightist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power, Madhya Pradesh has been ruled by the centrist Congress Party. The elected representatives and the bureaucracy together form an institution that has tremendous inertia, an ability to endure while changing only slightly. The state works at multiple levels by engaging with different actors. The structure of rural polity makes local elites in villages a natural ally of the state. Within Madhya Pradesh, the support of local capitalists (traders, contractors and large farmers) has always shaped state practice, even as populist schemes have been aimed at the largely tribal voting masses. The state also expands outwards beyond the geographical limits of Madhya Pradesh through its links with the Union government, national political parties and the national civil service, and, increasingly, with international capital. Besides bilateral aid, the World Bank funds several large projects in the state including the forestry and education sectors. With the liberalization of the Indian economy, several multinational corporations and other foreign firms have been invited to set up extractive industries and to execute public utility projects in Madhya Pradesh. Kickbacks and commissions are a sine qua non in such deals, and the state acts in close complicity with capital at different levels. However, the outcomes of state processes are not always foregone conclusions. Competing factions within the state and the necessity of maintaining legitimacy at different levels create opportunities for playing off one set of actors against another. These faultlines within the state and the tensions inherent in them, together with the pressure of opposing forces, enable political changes that go against the interest of the state. Social movements that engage with the state at different levels try to choose an arena for action that suits their ideology and capacity, even as the state attempts to pre-empt that choice.

This paper examines these political processes from a perspective that differs from that of the main actors themselves. I write this essay as a student of these movements, but also from the vantage
point of a Delhi-based civil liberties activist, involved in supporting such movements to withstand moments of crisis. By now there are well-established lines of action by which metropolitan human rights organizations deal with such violence, and the paper will discuss the routinization of such responses—working the media, sending a human rights investigative team, publicizing its report, approaching the Supreme Court and the National Human Rights Commission. This discussion is foregrounded so that the complexities of dealing with the state—the object of our deepest terrors as well as our highest hopes—can be brought out from personal experience. This rendering should not give the misleading impression that the perspectives of actors more directly involved in the struggle are less important, or that these actors in Madhya Pradesh participate in events only as victims. I do not have the resources to write on behalf of critically important others such as the tribal members of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, the peasants of the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the activists who work with them. This narrative tries to not be a totalizing one; I hope that by sharing this very partial account with different groups it will bring forth other voices and other stories, most importantly of those men and women who are engaged in fighting for their lives, bodies and land. In the process, it may also explore the potential for more effective struggles for social and environmental justice.

The paper begins with a quick look at the Narmada Bachao Andolan’s recent struggle against the Maheshwar dam, the response of the state through the twin modes of *saama* (equal, respectful treatment) and *danda* (punitive action). This section argues that the Andolan is able to deflect state violence and even turn it to advantage because the movement fits into certain pre-existing notions of ‘environmentalism’ in the minds of the intelligentsia. This section also suggests that the anti-dam movement’s environmental politics enable it to short-circuit local structures of power and successfully negotiate with a state which is dispersed across several locales nationally and internationally. The next section has a fuller discussion of another movement from the same district in central India, the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS). The AMS’ mobilization of tribal people against their immediate oppressors has elicited extremely violent state action. But the lines of conflict are blurred because of the complicity of some tribal people in the structures of domination. This complicity allows the state to use the weapons of *daama* (buying out) and *bhed* (inciting differences) along with *danda* (punitive action) so that violence appears to be internal and natural to the tribal condition. The paper argues that violence is structured through both state and civil society and it would be erroneous to attribute it only to state processes and instruments of domination. Violence also emanates from the institutions of caste and patriarchy. However, while some types of violence, such as that which occurs within a feud or factional dispute, may have their roots in civil society, the new strategies of domination and resistance reconfigure the feud so that it gets embedded in the asymmetrical structures of power nurtured by the state. The final section dwells on the role of metropolitan human rights networks in supporting grassroots organizations battling against state repression. It discusses some of the dilemmas of dealing with ‘the myth of the state’—our belief that, to maintain its legitimacy, the state must make itself partially accountable to those whom it oppresses.

4. Kautilya, the great political scientist of the Mauryan period, in his masterpiece *Arthashastra* (c. 250 AD) describes four weapons wielded by a ruler to subdue his opponents—*saama, daama, danda, bhed*. Only one of these, *danda*, refers to outright repression. *Bhed* suggests instigating differences among your enemies; *daama* that you buy them over, and, the subtlest of all, *saama*, that you co-opt opponents by involving them in dialogue.
The Maheshwar dam is a hydroelectric project being built on the river Narmada in district Khargone, Madhya Pradesh in central India. It is a part of the much larger Narmada Valley Project, which envisages the construction of 30 large dams, 135 medium dams and 3000 small dams. With the contract for this 400 MW project being awarded to a consortium of Indian and German capitalists led by the firm of S. Kumars, this will be India's first private hydel project. The controversy around the dam touches upon issues which are now well known, thanks in large measure to the indefatigable work of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) [Campaign to Save the Narmada] against the Sardar Sarovar Project and against large dams in general. Maheshwar is an important temple town, a centre of pilgrimage with many historic monuments, and a thriving centre of handloom weaving. Earlier, the project would have submerged parts of Maheshwar town, but the uproar forced the state to redesign the project so that the town was left out. Now the project will submerge around 5000 hectares of rich agricultural land in 61 villages of the Nimar plains, displacing about 2200 resident households and destroying the livelihood of thousands of migrant workers. These are mixed caste villages dominated by landowners of the Patidar caste, with other groups including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims also represented.6 As with all displacement, the loss will not only involve material impoverishment but deeper cultural and emotional dislocation.7

Since 1996, the NBA has mobilized villagers in the submergence zone of the dam around the critical issues of human displacement and socio-economic rehabilitation. While the state government proposes to compulsorily acquire their land, no alternative land has been provided for resettlement. Instead, only meagre sums of money, much below the market price, have been paid out. While this government procedure conforms to the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the NBA has forcefully argued that legal sanction, especially that derived from an outdated colonial law, is an inadequate basis for state action. Justice demands actions that may even have to transform law; the NBA has led a struggle to amend the Land Acquisition Act at the national level (see also Asif 1999). Closely related to the issue of displacement is that of environmental impact. All proposed large dams need clearance by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Maheshwar was given ‘conditional clearance’ in 1994, subject to resettlement being completed by 1997-8, and subject to studies on

5. Of the large dams, Tawa, Bargi, Barna and Sukta have already been built. Work continues on the Sardar Sarovar Project which is now recognized internationally as an icon of the struggle against large dams, and on the Narmada Sagar. The Narmada Bachao Andolan started with Sardar Sarovar and went on to also mobilize those displaced by the Bargi dam, and those threatened by Narmada Sagar.

6. A mixed-caste village in India consists of several Hindu and Muslim castes, ranked hierarchically in terms of purity and pollution, and separated by rules about marriage and food-sharing. Except at the very top (Brahmins), ritual ranking generally coincides with economic and political power. As a numerically significant, landowning group that is also fairly high in the caste hierarchy, Patidars form the dominant caste within these villages. The Scheduled Castes comprise the former ‘untouchables’, castes considered to be so impure that they lay outside the caste system. The Scheduled Tribes (or ‘adivasis’ [original dwellers] as they refer to themselves) consist of disparate social groups that were first classified as ‘tribal’ by the colonial state (Beteille 1998). Both Scheduled Castes and Tribes comprise the poorest and most exploited sections of Indian society.

environmental impact being carried out. ‘Conditional clearance’ is a slippery slope because, even if permission is later revoked because of conditions not being met, or because the studies show major problems with the project, the *fait accompli* of construction means that it is too late to stop the project. However, in the case of Maheshwar, successful mobilization by the NBA on the issues of displacement and environmental impact, compelled the Madhya Pradesh (MP) government to announce in January 1998 that it would suspend all work on the dam, power house and land acquisitions, pending a comprehensive review of costs, benefits and alternatives. This review would be conducted by a joint Task Force that would include representatives of the NBA.

The relatively prompt capitulation of the MP government to the NBA's demands is unusual and requires explanation. There is a history to this relationship, which goes back to the NBA's twelve-year old struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). In the case of the SSP, while much of the submergence lies in Madhya Pradesh, almost all the benefits go to the neighbouring state of Gujarat. The present MP State government has argued that the SSP hurts the interests of the state. In March 1998, the government had even asked for a reassessment of the decision of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal on the sharing of water between riparian states, in the light of the new problems that emerged after the Tribunal's decision. Since this stand, adopted to show concern for safeguarding the interests of 'the people of Madhya Pradesh', happens to support the position of the NBA, relations between the MP State government (especially the Chief Minister Digvijay Singh) and the anti-dam movement had become relatively cordial.

Another important factor is the substantial international clout of the Andolan. The campaign against Sardar Sarovar was an extraordinarily successful example of organized mobilization. Besides the affected people, the campaign brought together national and international media, international NGOs (Environment Defense Fund, Survival International, Friends of the Earth, International Rivers Network), lobbyists and ordinary environmentalists attracted by, among other factors, the potent iconography of the movement. The NBA has maintained this network with the aid of new technologies such as the internet. Events in Maheshwar unleash a barrage of reportage in the national and international media, the attention of several monitoring bodies and a spate of protest letters to the Indian and MP government. The present MP Chief Minister strives hard to project an image of being development-oriented, this is a pre-requisite for getting loans from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and so on. The state must also appear to be ‘environmentally correct’ and, in fact, the Chief Minister has been recently rated as the second most ‘green’ politician by the Centre for Science and Environment, a Delhi-based NGO. So being on good terms with a celebrity social movement is important. And thus, in the case of Maheshwar, the Chief Minister personally spoke to the Andolan leadership and suspended construction of the dam.

The joint Task Force met in February 1998 in a ‘cordial atmosphere’ and the MP government

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8. Data collected after the Tribunal’s decision in 1978 showed that the Narmada river had significantly less water than planned for and that the scale of displacement was much larger than estimated. Changes in these two critical factors would drastically alter the distribution of the project's benefits and costs.

9. MP is the only state to publish a ‘Human Development Report’ along the lines of the United Nations Development Programme’s annual offering. It also has several Technology Missions—for Primary Education, Watershed Development, Immunization, etc.
made data available to the NBA. The state government agreed to prepare a detailed note justifying various aspects of the project, while the NBA agreed to prepare its own document on project costs, benefits and alternatives by April. However, while this dialogue was on, the contractors of the project placed large advertisements in local newspapers proclaiming the project’s ‘massive benefits’ and ‘minimal displacement’. In March, the contractors asked the government for permission to build a wall for ‘safety purposes’ to prevent damage during the monsoons to existing excavations. Permission was granted by the Chief Minister. Then the NBA discovered that the wall would be a permanent structure and an integral part of the dam. A series of demonstrations at the state capital Bhopal and at the dam site ensued to protest against the state’s reneging on its agreement with the NBA. On April 22, hundreds of villagers mobilized by the NBA converged at the dam site to stop construction, only to be surrounded by policemen, some of them on horseback. As protestors surged forward to break through the cordon, they were beaten with lathis (batons), kicked and dragged to waiting police vans and arrested. The villagers reassembled the next day and again tried to force construction to a standstill, only to be brutally beaten and arrested. There were large numbers of women among the demonstrators; their clothes were torn, they were verbally abused and threatened with sexual assault.

Mobilization against this outrage was swift. There was extensive coverage in the media. The National Commission for Women and the National Commission for Human Rights (independent quasi-judicial commissions of the government of India) sent investigating teams. Hundreds of activists and social workers belonging to the National Alliance of People’s Movements, and from organizations all over Madhya Pradesh, as well as prominent persons (such as Justice Krishna Iyer and Swami Agnivesh) visited Maheshwar or issued statements in solidarity with the NBA. In response to a call from the NBA, human rights organizations in Delhi sent a team to investigate too. Generally, assembling a team is exhausting work (see below for the case of the AMS) but, for the NBA, there were more volunteers than were needed. On its return, the team’s report received fairly wide coverage by the media. Since the immediate crisis of state repression seemed rather mild (when compared to the horrors that happen all over the country every day), the report judiciously chose to focus on the larger issue of the project and the injustice of displacement. The bruised and battered bodies of the demonstrators, and their torn clothes, testified to the violence of the state, a violence that fleshed out the equally savage yet imperceptible process of forced displacement. The blockade at the dam site, with its massed bodies, dramatized the broader struggle against the state’s power to evict people at will. The human rights teams thus focused not only on the immediate incidents of violence but also on the context of forced displacement within which they occurred.

The well-oiled response that the NBA was able to elicit in a case of relatively mild human rights violation comes from its present pre- eminent position as a social movement par excellence. This position has been achieved over time by carving out a distinctive ideological territory as a non-violent movement of small peasants and tribal people led by a charismatic woman, Medha Patkar. The Narmada Bachao Andolan’s respectability in the eyes of the media and other ‘reference publics’ also derives from its use of Gandhian idioms of protest, the palpable probity of its leaders and

10. NBA News Alert and Update on Maheshwar in the India Environment Digest, April 8, 1998 (Vol.1: No.25), IndiaLink-Environment.

11. A full description of the mobilization may be found in Narmada Samachar (NBA Update: June-July 1998).
members, and its transparent functioning. The Andolan has defined its struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Project as the fight against ‘destructive development’, a process which does violence to nature and to people. However, although NBA politics point towards a rich understanding of the environment-development connection with Ecological Marxist underpinnings, this ideology is little known and rarely accepted by people other than committed supporters of the cause. Despite the Andolan’s frequent assertion that it is not an environmental movement in the popular sense of protecting ‘nature’, but has a much more far-reaching critique of the present connections between development and environment from the point of view of social justice as well as ecological sustainability, this political critique has not found a wide audience. The Andolan is commonly perceived to be an environmental movement because it is identified as opposed to the submergence of forests, and the displacement of forest-dwelling communities. Its broader critique of ‘development’ as a global process which constantly extracts and destroys resources, skews technological choices and worsens social inequality, has few takers. In the popular imagination, dams appear to be isolated monuments jutting out of a misty political-economic landscape.

Even though the Andolan’s critique of ‘development’ as a general process has not won many followers, the movement has achieved the goal of eroding the credibility of big dams in India. Building on the growing international campaign against dams (Goldsmith and Hildyard 1984; McCully 1996), and the burgeoning environmentalism among sections of the intelligentsia since the 1970s, the NBA succeeded in knitting together an impressive coalition ranging from a grassroots movement of the displaced population to urban middle-class supporters all over the country and abroad. This innovative mix of ‘people power’ along with advocacy, lobbying, media and event management parallels some of the campaigns of the Indian freedom struggle in the 1940s.

The Andolan created the political space where the rights of adivasis (tribal groups) received special attention; its discussion of displacement brought to centre-stage issues of control over the ownership of land, forests and water. In the process, it also defined forbidden zones of violation—acts and attitudes which were no longer acceptable—for instance, displacing people against their will in the name of ‘national interest’, and not consulting people about their impending fate. Yet these enormous political gains do not appear to have spread. In the same district of Khargone, where the MP government has been compelled over time to treat the Andolan with circumspection, the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan experienced a totally different face of the state.

**ADIVASI MUKTI SANGATHAN: THE STATE AND CONTESTED COMMUNITIES**

The images that the state of Madhya Pradesh evokes most often are of forests, adivasis (tribal people), poverty and ‘backwardness’. About a third of its area, 133 thousand sq. km., is covered by forests. Every fourth person in the state belongs to a Scheduled Tribe. Sixty per cent of the state’s rural population lives below the poverty line. Average life expectancy for men and women is 54 years. The infant mortality rate is 111 per thousand live births (for India as a whole, the IMR is 80/1000). Only

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12. Lack of space prevents a fuller discussion of the Andolan’s ideology. A more detailed account may be found in Baviskar (1995). For the Andolan’s statement about its politics, see NBA (1991, 1994).

13. I am grateful to Paul Greenough for pointing this out.
58 per cent of the men and 29 per cent of the women are literate. Only 5.6 per cent of villages have medical facilities. Only half the rural households have access to safe drinking water.\textsuperscript{14}

Explanations for the convergence of these factors—forests, adivasis, poverty and ‘backwardness’, vary. Non-adivasis blame adivasis for being lazy and shiftless, prone to drunkenness and violence. The state administration, which is overwhelmingly manned by non-adivasis, appends ‘remoteness’ as another reason for the absence of development inputs such as education and health services. On the other side are the explanations of organizations such as the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) [Organization for Tribal Liberation], that has been working in the Nimar plains (Khargone and Khandwa districts, south-west Madhya Pradesh), since 1992. According to the AMS, adivasis are poor because they do not control their basic means of subsistence—jal, jangal, zameen (water, forests and land). Adivasi agricultural lands have been gradually alienated by non-adivasi moneylenders, exploiting the opportunities afforded by chronic adivasi indebtedness. Small loans taken by adivasis to tide over seasons of scarcity or moments of crisis are tied to extortionate interest rates (up to 240 per cent per annum) and fraud so that the debtor often ends up losing his land. In the case of the Nimar plains, the alienation of adivasi lands by non-adivasis has a history that goes back at least two centuries; it includes several waves of migrants who were encouraged to settle here by erstwhile governments because they belonged to ‘industrious’ peasant castes such as the Patidars [WNG 1970]. Antagonisms with Patidars and worsening conditions of subsistence brought about by the alienation of the commons contributed to the escalation of ‘crime’ in the form of dacoities by tribal groups.\textsuperscript{15} Over time, the Patidars got the best alluvial lands in the plains next to the river Narmada, while the low hills with prospects only of dryland farming were left to the adivasis. The expanding population cut into the forests which, since Independence, have come to be fully under state control. Adivasis who cleared areas under the control of the Forest Department for cultivation now face the charge of being encroachers and destroyers of forests. Without secure access to land, adivasis are constantly harassed by the Forest Department, and forced to pay bribes to avoid trouble with the authorities.

Control over land, especially forest land, is highly contested, and the increasing presence of the AMS has changed the situation significantly, as the following incident reveals: According to a public statement made by the Divisional Forest Officer, Burhanpur (Khandwa district), on August 28, 1997, he received information that many trees had been felled in Mandwa village. Villagers had encroached on forest land and planted crops. The Forest Officer went with a party of 400 Forest Department personnel, several armed Special Action Force men and about 20 regular policemen. They recovered felled teak wood from the spot. As they were leaving, they were surrounded by 200 adivasis who attacked them with stones launched from catapults. The Special Armed Force fired in self-defence, first into the air and then aiming at people. Two villagers were killed and six others were seriously injured.

\textsuperscript{14} All data from Dreze and Sen (1996), except data on forests (Buch 1991) and tribes (GoMP 1995).

\textsuperscript{15} Although it is tempting to re-interpret colonial accounts of tribal ‘crime’ from a subaltern perspective, it would be simplistic to invert ‘crime’ in retrospect as ‘resistance’. If these are the first footprints of rebellion, they bear the hallmark of a complex relationship with the state. Such a relationship was enmeshed in patron-client networks with shared notions of honour and fair play. ‘Crime’/’Resistance’ was often the outcome of a moral economy betrayed (for an account of the relationship between Khajya Naik, a celebrated tribal rebel of Khargone, and the Holkar princely state, see Baviskar 1992: Appendix 1).
The Forest Officer’s statement conflicts with villagers’ account of events. According to the villagers in Mandwa, about twenty of them were working in their fields which had an almost mature crop of sorghum. They had been cultivating these fields for several years and the Forest Department knew all about it because they were regularly bribed to look the other way. No trees had stood in these fields for twenty years. In the last elections, the MLA (member of the state legislative assembly) had promised that adivasis would be given leases on forest land which they had been cultivating, but so far no leases had been granted. Since they joined the AMS a year ago, the villagers had stopped paying bribes to forest officials. This had brought down the Forest Department’s wrath on their heads. On August 27, police and forest personnel came to their fields and began uprooting the standing crop. Villagers threw stones to stop them and the officers opened fire. The two people who were shot were taken away by the police who cremated their bodies, denying their families’ pleading for a proper funeral. The other six injured farmers were left to fend for themselves. Nine farmers’ crops were completely uprooted, destroying their only source of food for the whole year.

An investigation by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties found that the First Information Report filed with the police by the Sub-divisional Forest Officer immediately after the incident makes no mention of tree-felling or teak wood recovery from villagers. This version seems to have been concocted later to justify the extreme use of force by the police. Nor was any wood reported to have been recovered from the village. The circumstances, especially the presence of such a large armed party, suggest that the Forest Department went with the intention of forcibly removing encroachments, without trying any legal or other measures first. No preventive steps were taken to avoid a confrontation, nor were less brutal techniques of control (tear gas, lathi charge) attempted. The deaths and the injuries were caused by the excessive use of force by the Forest Department and the police.

How was this extraordinary violence justified? Why were less lethal techniques of crowd control not used? The answer lies in the status of adivasis whose economic oppression is tethered to social discrimination. Adivasis, especially those who follow their traditional lifestyle, are generally treated by non-adivasis as sub-human, as objects of contempt and ridicule mingled with an underlying current of fear. Even today, the everyday caste pollution rules prohibit both Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe members from sharing food, water and space with caste Hindus, and punish transgressions with fines and physical violence. Adivasi women are harassed routinely by non-adivasi men. There are also more extreme instances of bullying and even sadism to keep the adivasis in their place. In 1996, three adivasi men were stripped and beaten, and then tied to the back of a Forest Department jeep and made to run behind it for several kilometres to the Forest Range office where their heads were shaved and their faces tared. Their homes were also burnt. All this because they could

16. Encroachments on forest land can be regularized if they occurred before October 1980, if the encroacher’s legal holdings do not exceed two hectares and if the gradient of the encroached field is less than 30°. However, few adivasis have documentary proof of occupation before 1980 because most of them paid bribes that disappeared into the pockets of forest officials. (For a fuller discussion of the problems around forest encroachments, see Baviskar 1994).

17. Eight years ago I had met a policeman who had been involved in a similar operation in the Taloda forest in Maharashtra. In Taloda, adivasi encroachers were forcibly evicted in order to settle other adivasis displaced from the Sardar Sarovar dam. The policeman spoke of his anguish in having to destroy a standing crop, ‘I come from a farming family myself. I felt like I was cutting off my hand’. State violence victimizes people on both sides; the agents of the state may also be crushed by its brutality.
not immediately pay a bribe of Rs 20,000 to forest officials for overlooking their encroachment on forest land. In April 1997, a local trader murdered an adivasi servant who had been working for him for six years and threw away his body in a nearby stream because he had absented himself from work for one day. Although the police registered a case, no further action was taken. In May 1997, officers of a co-operative bank ‘arrested’ an adivasi youth and killed him. His offence? His father owed the bank Rs 3500. In June 1997, an adivasi boy was beaten and forced to drink his own urine because he took water from a public well. The adivasi body is the site for proclaiming one’s power; through torture and humiliation, the social fact of adivasi wretchedness is branded on the physical self and on the psyche. Such depressingly familiar stories occur routinely not only in Khargone, but all over western Madhya Pradesh. To be an adivasi is to be a legitimate target for non-adivasi violence; to be an adivasi who talks back is to ask for trouble.

The AMS squarely attributes adivasi oppression to their powerlessness before the state and in the market. Corrupt revenue officials, brutal policemen and foresters, missing school-teachers and moonlighting doctors make up a system which militates against adivasi empowerment. The developmental state is conspicuously absent in the markets where adivasis who come to sell their produce face a cartel of cheating traders. Adivasis are denied the basic human right to live with dignity by upper-caste Hindus. Yet this divide of exploiter and exploited, dominant and subordinate, is not an unambiguous social cleavage between non-adivasis and adivasis. The faultline of social conflict is held together by the glue of dalals (middlemen), the adivasis who are go-betweens and agents serving non-adivasi bosses. Many dalals are village headmen who trade in the currency of patronage in the powerful economy of votes, fixing elections, getting government work done, offering protection for a price. Young men from relatively wealthy families who have access to state education gradually become dalals as they hang out with Hindi-speaking non-adivasi shopkeepers and government employees. Some dalals go on to become members of the State Legislature. The AMS blames this local elite and its nexus with the local timber and liquor mafia that is politically backed by the Congress Party (the ruling party in Madhya Pradesh) for the oppression of adivasis.

In the last three years, the AMS’ political activities have brought it into direct confrontation with this power elite. Through massive demonstrations and other displays of strength outside the district administration offices, in the nearby city of Indore and at the state capital, the AMS has successfully compelled the government to retrieve adivasi lands and other property that had been taken over by moneylenders. The AMS’ campaigns forced the government to suspend several corrupt revenue officers, policemen and forest officers. Forest guards and rangers and police inspectors have had to return money that they had earlier extorted. Mobilization in the local markets resulted in the installation of electronic weighing machines and fairer prices. Atrocities against adivasis, which would earlier have gone unremarked, are now reported to the administration and the press, and the victims’ demand for justice has led to punitive transfers and suspensions of guilty officers. Besides local issues, the AMS made a bid to mobilize adivasis across the country by holding an impressive

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18. Rs 43 = $1.

19. An economic nexus is buttressed by the cultural codes embedded in formal education. By learning to look down on adivasi dialect, dress and other markers of tribal identity, educated tribal youth seek to emulate the habits of caste Hindus.
rally calling for adivasi self-rule in areas where they are numerically dominant. Not only did such activism hurt the economic interests of the dominant non-adivasis, such visible flexing of organizational muscle obviously threatened the power base of the adivasi leaders affiliated with the ruling Congress Party. The bribes and commissions from non-adivasi traders and from illicit trafficking were jeopardized as were the votes from adivasis who had begun to ask uncomfortable questions about corruption.

To counter the AMS, the deputy chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Subhash Yadav (a non-adivasi), whose economic and political hold over his constituency in Khargone district was being undermined by the AMS, organized the Adivasi Samaj Sudhar Shanti Sena (ASSSS) [Tribal Social Reform Peace Army] in 1997. This has further reinforced the complexity of the AMS’ battles with the oppressors of adivasis. Instead of non-adivasi officials and traders, they are mainly confronted by adivasi groups mobilized by adivasi dalals affiliated with Subhash Yadav and the ruling Congress Party. Pitting adivasis against adivasis gives the state much more leeway to explain violence as a ‘normal’ aspect of tribal culture and to disguise its own culpability in violent encounters.

A key confrontation that gives insight into the sort of trouble that the AMS’ work stirred up is the incident at Kabri village in early 1996. The AMS’ anti-liquor campaign had resulted in the closure of legal and illegal liquor vends in around 250 villages and considerable losses to both vendors and their protectors—the police and local dalals. One such ‘injured party’ was Jhagdia Patel, the hereditary adivasi headman of Kabri and the block Congress committee president. The AMS took the battle to Jhagdia’s own door when its members in Kabri declared that no liquor would be sold in the village during Indal, the most important adivasi festival. Jhagdia and his men retaliated by abducting one of the anti-liquor activists off a bus, breaking his leg and arm and, when he asked for water, urinating into his mouth. When villagers went to complain, the local police refused to register a case against Jhagdia, because they were in league with him and because the AMS had earlier earned the hatred of the police inspector by making him return Rs 1000 which he had extorted from a villager.

After a few days, the police inspector called Rem Singh, the sarpanch (elected village head) and leader of the anti-liquor campaign, to the police station, ostensibly to effect a compromise between his faction and Jhagdia Patel’s. It is customary for the police to arbitrate in village-level disputes. Rem Singh went warily, with two companions armed with bows and arrows. Their motorcycle was ambushed by Jhagdia’s group, which was accompanied by the police. In trying to escape, one of Rem

20. The cause of tribal self-government received legislative recognition with the central government’s enactment of the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996. This Act gives significant powers to the gram sabha (village assembly) over the natural resources of the village and over the development funds received from the state government. However, the enactment has not been followed by the necessary step of notification, which would move the Act from paper to practice.

21. Indal is traditionally celebrated with vast amounts of home-brewed alcohol made from mahua (Madhuca indica), which is first ritually offered to the gods and the ancestors and then drunk by all. This drinking was circumscribed both socially (by being confined to specific occasions) and naturally (by the amount of mahua available). With the MP government’s liberalized policy of licensing liquor vends in the state, cheap factory-manufactured alcohol in polythene packets is available on hand throughout the year. The dynamics of drinking have changed to encourage excessive drinking with all its attendant problems of alcoholism, domestic violence and financial ruin (see also Hardiman 1987: chapter 7).
Singh’s men shot dead one of Jhagdia’s men. The next day, the police came to Kabri to ‘investigate’ and beat up the only people they found—all women. The day after, Jhagdia Patel and his men, with the police standing by, went on a spree looting, vandalizing and burning the homes of Rem Singh and the anti-liquor group affiliated to the AMS. AMS activists responded by complaining to senior police officers at the district and division headquarters, the Chief Secretary and Home Secretary of the state and the state Tribal Welfare Minister. Senior officials visited Kabri at the AMS’ behest, but no further action was taken.

The Kabri incident is explained by the AMS as a struggle against a liquor mafia that enjoys police protection. Yet this story is written over another which had not been erased—the long-standing tussle between Jhagdia and Rem Singh for control over the village. The rise of the AMS in the region offered Rem Singh an opportunity to ally with an alternate power centre that could challenge Jhagdia’s supremacy. This element of rivalry between the two factions enabled the police to pose as mediators, neutral agents resolving a dispute between feuding tribal factions in a time-honoured fashion. The killing (in self-defence) of one of Jhagdia’s men allowed the police to terrorize AMS supporters and then tacitly support the loot and arson of their homes. In the local press, the sequence of events in Kabri was mainly recorded as a murderous feud between two tribal groups, without going into the wider politics of the issue. However, Jhagdia Patel’s group and others in the Congress party identified the AMS as a major threat to their interests. The Kabri incidents highlight the fusion of factional rivalry with an ideological agenda created by the AMS. As the state changed the social context of drinking alcohol, the anti-liquor campaign of the AMS, besides other effects, transformed political resources that some villagers attempted to seize. The result was a potent brew of liquor-laced factional politics. The police, on their part, attempted to contain this dynamism and complexity by framing it within the familiar matrix of the feud.

STATE VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM: UNFOLDING EVENTS AND ANNOTATIONS

Late August 1997. A small news item on the ‘states’ page of Delhi newspapers states: ‘block Congress president killed by militant group in MP’. It mentions that Jhagdia Patel was killed by a mob led by AMS activists. The report is datelined Khargone, so I read it with attention. I have known the AMS from the time when I worked in a similar organization, the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS), in the neighbouring district of Jhabua. The AMS and KMCS would often co-ordinate their campaigns and so we had friends among the activists there. I know that the AMS has had a number of skirmishes with the Congress party in the past, but this report of a violent death is worrying. A couple of days later, another news item datelined Khandwa reports that ‘two killed in police firing in MP’.

September 4. I get a call from Bijoy, an AMS activist. He is in Delhi, trying to muster support for the AMS, which is reeling under a wave of state repression. The police have registered cases falsely accusing hundreds of AMS members and activists of murder, violent attacks on the police and forest guards, and a

22. AMS conforms to the pattern of struggle-oriented mass organizations initiated by people from urban, middle-class backgrounds which is common in tribal areas. Bijoy and Nikunja, two young men from Orissa started the AMS in 1992. Bijoy used to work with Oxfam earlier. Two years ago, they were joined by Madhuri, a historian by training who had worked with the voluntary organization Ekta Parishad in central MP. These three ‘outside’ activists have been joined by several full-time, local activists.
slew of other charges. AMS workers are being picked up and arrested. A simultaneous smear campaign against the organization is being conducted in the Madhya Pradesh press, calling them Naxalites. There are reports that the AMS may be banned. I call up various rights organizations in Delhi on behalf of my own organization, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). We meet at the Gandhi Peace Foundation on September 5. Bijoy explains the situation and passes around cuttings from MP newspapers. They are scary; if you just go by them, you’d think that the AMS is a dangerous gang of criminals, inciting adivasis to violence, instigating fights between them. There are authoritative statements from senior police officers saying that AMS harbours ‘history-sheeters’, people who are recorded as notorious ‘bad characters’ in police files. High-ranking forest officers say that the entire forest administration is terrorized by the AMS which encourages adivasis to encroach on forests and cut trees illegally. Subhash Yadav, the deputy Chief Minister, asserts that if he were Home Minister, the AMS would be extirpated from not just MP, but out of India. He goes on to say that the organization does its best to sabotage development work because development would bring the adivasis closer to the government.

The AMS has a vested interest in keeping adivasis poor and powerless. Each newspaper report is damning; the cumulative burden of lies frightening.

Why do I assume so readily that the reports against the AMS are untrue? I disbelieve them because in 1993, the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath lived through a crisis such as this. Every day the papers would publish lies that sounded completely plausible. There were police cases against us about incidents which were totally fabricated and we were arrested, charged and put on trial. Later, because of the intervention of the Supreme Court, I had an opportunity to examine the police diaries (which record offences and their investigation) for these cases. The case diaries were a Kafkaesque genre of fiction; I read about myself and my friends attacking government officials with bows and arrows, using abusive language that ‘hurt the ears of the police’, threatening to kill adivasis—all this backed up by the statements of witnesses, confessions, weapons seizure memos and many other authoritative documents. The totality of untruths was so seamless that I could not find the tiniest flaw to pierce through this virtual universe of crime where we figured as the villains. This did not happen, I told myself, and it sounded weak to my own ears.

To counter this onslaught, the AMS needs to get out an alternative version of events in the media. It also needs to muster support to make the MP government stop its terror tactics.

In Delhi, we decide to contact friendly journalists in the press and in TV to cover Bijoy’s story and to

23. Naxalites are Maoist groups who believe in armed struggle for land reform and other causes of the oppressed. In Madhya Pradesh, they are active in forested regions in the east where their guerilla tactics keep the state administration and non-adivasi exploiters on edge. Calling an organization ‘naxalite’ is an easy first step in justifying the use of state violence against it.

24. This statement is made at a public meeting organized by the Forest Department to inaugurate an ‘ecodevelopment centre’ where villagers would be trained in forest conservation and techniques of improved management (Chautha Sansar newspaper, June 23, 1997). This is the approved model of conservation, Joint Forest Management (JFM) as funded through the World Bank’s MP Forestry Project, where ‘reputed NGOs’ join hands with the government to teach villagers how to participate in forest protection. The agenda is pre-set; areas, tasks and species are chosen by the state. Basic issues such as conflict over encroachments are either sidelined or unilaterally resolved. There is money for small handouts (loans for women, self-employment for young men) and for large accretions to the Forest Department. While there are considerable variations in JFM practices across the country, in Madhya Pradesh the reluctance of the Forest Department to alter its statist orientation has made JFM largely ineffective.
travel to MP. On behalf of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, I volunteer to organize an investigation team to probe the incidents. An activist from the Delhi Forum agrees to circulate a protest letter for a signature campaign. Another activist from the National Alliance of People’s Movements offers to set up interviews with the Home Minister, sympathetic members of parliament, etc. We have limited time and even more limited resources. What is the most effective strategy to help the AMS?

All of September 6 goes in making hundreds of phone calls to set up the fact-finding team. Such a team is now an essential response to a crisis involving state repression. It provides some support to the beleaguered organization for it reminds the state to be more circumspect because a third party is monitoring it. The victims of repression often find such visits cathartic because they can talk out the horrors that they have experienced. And there is some reassurance that you are not alone. The investigation team’s report is publicized through a press conference and sent to various state human rights bodies or to the courts, where it is often an important instrument for lending credibility to the organization’s side of the story. Yet the investigations by human rights groups always walk a tightrope between being ‘independent’ and being ‘partisan’, between being ‘judicial’ and being ‘activist’. We choose from within a circle of people who are already committed to the cause and who we know will submit a report that will support the organization. We look for people who can read between the lines of hostile news reports, who will automatically suspect every statement made by a police officer and forester, who can see through the power of the state’s imagination. And yet these must be people whose names carry weight with the Establishment they try to challenge.

Phone calls, protocol. Who should be asked to call whom for maximum effect. Many refuse because they are already tied up with other crises, equally important tasks. Others can’t travel at such short notice. Also, the AMS is not a very well known organization in Delhi; their social capital is too scarce to summon anything more than statements of concern from most people on this circuit. Eventually we have a team headed by a retired High Court judge with three other seasoned human rights activists. We meet to decide on their terms of reference. PUCL co-ordinates the logistics of their schedule, transport, press conferences in Indore and Delhi with MP-based activists. Even as all these arrangements take place, we learn that Jhagdia Patel’s killer, an AMS activist named Kalia, who surrendered to the police, was hacked to death in police custody.

**FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM**

Kalia, an AMS activist, was among the panchayat mediators in a property dispute between two brothers in his village Julwania. When the collective decision went against one of the brothers, he held Kalia responsible for his defeat. Jhagdia Patel, the Congress leader from Kabri who had battled the AMS during the anti-liquor campaign, saw this as his chance to hit out at the AMS, which was eroding his hegemony in the villages. He stoked the ire against Kalia by holding a meeting in Kabri and exhorting people to ‘teach Kalia a lesson’. Apprehending trouble, AMS activists met the District

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25. The People’s Union of Civil Liberties team consisted of Ram Bhushan Mehrotra (former High Court judge), Dr R. M. Pal (editor, *PUCL Bulletin*), Lakshmi Murthy (Saheli Women’s Resource Centre) and Govindan Kutty (All-India People’s Resistance Forum).

26. A group of elders may be constituted as an adivasi panchayat to settle disputes within the community. The parties to the dispute voluntarily agree to be bound by the decision of the panchayat.
Superintendent of Police thrice in August, but he did not take any action to defuse the situation. On August 24, Jhagdia Patel met the Superintendent to demand police protection, which he was given. On August 25, Jhagdia Patel and about 35 other men, accompanied by the police, went to Kalia’s house in Julwania. He wasn’t home, so they stripped and gang-raped his wife, Namlibai. They then proceeded to rape at least five other women in the adjoining houses. Before they were raped, 19 year-olds Batlabai’s two month-old baby and Munnibai’s three month-old infant were snatched from their arms by the Shanti Sena men and police who prodded them with rifles. Both the infants were dashed into a nearby stream. Their bodies were not found. Later, the women fled from their homes that were being looted by their rapists and took refuge in the forest where they stayed in hiding for 2-3 weeks. Other villagers, fearing further violence, left their homes and went away. The police did not register a case against Jhagdia and others.

On August 26, when Jhagdia Patel and his protective police escort had stopped to cross a swollen stream, they were surrounded by Kalia and about 150 other men. Jhagdia and his party rushed into a nearby house and barricaded themselves. Kalia and his men gathered outside the door, asking the police to hand over Jhagdia. The police then pushed Jhagdia out where he was killed with an arrow and then his body stoned. Later, Jhagdia’s body was recovered by his relatives who vowed at his funeral to avenge his death in the same manner. The police were present at the funeral. On August 27, cases were registered for the murder of Jhagdia. The police announced a reward of Rs 10,000 for Kalia’s arrest and Rs 1000 for Rem Singh of Kabri (Jhagdia’s old rival). On August 31, a ministerial team led by deputy chief minister Subhash Yadav arrived in the area. The administration announced that Jhagdia’s family would be given Rs 100,000 as compensation.

On September 14, Kalia and 16 other accused surrendered before the Deputy Inspector General of Police on the advice of AMS leaders. They were remanded to police custody for two days by the court on September 15. On September 17, Kalia was taken with an armed escort of 15 policemen in two jeeps, ‘to recover a firearm used in Jhagdia’s murder’ (Jhagdia had been killed with an arrow and stones). On the way back, the vehicles passed through Jhagdia’s hamlet. The jeeps were ‘suddenly’ surrounded by 200 men. The police handed Kalia over to them and he was killed with an axe.

The PUCL investigation found evidence that Kalia’s death was probably set up by the police in collaboration with the Congress. The Congress-backed Shanti Sena workers were touring the area with the police after Jhagdia’s death. There was no good reason to take Kalia for recovering a firearm since Jhagdia had been murdered with an arrow and stones; nor was there a need to use a route that passed through Jhagdia’s village. Then there were the statements of support from the deputy chief minister. ‘Taking all circumstances into consideration, the team [was] of the prima facie view that there [was] complicity of the police in the custodial death of Kalia’.

VIOLENCE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

What is the connection between these violent incidents and the environment? Perhaps it is this apparent lack of connection that is precisely the problem. In the mind of a wider urban public, the AMS’ credibility is low. It is represented and perceived as a lawless organization, urging adivasis to destroy the forest, inciting them to take arms against the state, shielding murderers. The odds are stacked against it—the administration, the political party in power, the press—all the elements
conspire to represent the organization in an unfavourable light. Much of the mud sticks. How can the AMS defend itself? It can argue that the fate of the forest is inseparable from the issue of tribal rights to the forest and also from the related issue of rights to agricultural land, water and credit. And that access to these, in turn, hinges upon adivasis being accepted as equal citizens who are pre-eminently entitled to government resources and protection. And that for years the administration and the Congress party have kept adivasis subservient and it is this oppression which must be resisted. It can argue that as long as lands remain under the control of a Forest Department that has the power to decide whether they will bear trees or crops or whether forests will be sold on the sly to the timber mafia, adivasis will continue to be blamed for destroying forests. It can also argue that adivasis are fighting to shed their present status as sub-human creatures and savages, and to be recognized as a class with the greatest stake in the conservation of forest that must at least participate in decision-making. But this answer to the environment question is too complex to be readily understood by possible sympathizers in the intelligentsia.

But what of the tragedy of murder, revenge, rape, and more murder? The structural framework of radical politics, the mass-based AMS versus the local state, is not sufficient explanation for this cycle of violence. Murder and rape, especially in retaliation, are elements in a traditional feud of honour, which acquire entirely new dimensions because of the larger politics in which they are now embedded. Yet in its explanations, the state chooses to ignore both the wider political context and the complicity of some of its agents in these crimes. It presents violence as a normal event within tribal society. The PUCL team was repeatedly told by senior state officials that ‘among tribals, it is natural to avenge murder with murder. We couldn’t have stopped it’. Yet political affiliation decides how the murderer and the victims’ families are treated. While Jhagdia’s family gets state compensation, Kalia’s killers are still loose. Though Kalia died in police custody, there is no state compensation for his widow who is still traumatized by rape, the destruction of her home and the fear of further reprisals. A police officer confidently asserted to the press that, ‘rape is very common in tribal society. After all, adivasi girls are promiscuous. They run off and get married; they have divorce too. The women of Julwania have not filed a complaint because it is a trivial matter for them’. The freedom to select a husband and to divorce, a part of tribal culture, is interpreted by caste Hindus as a sign of ‘loose morals’ that deny an adivasi woman the right to her own body. Her ‘promiscuity’ makes rape inconsequential. Tribal culture, and the status of women within it, becomes a convenient device to fix and explain violence, to routinize it. But scarred bodies and the scarred land tell a different story.

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE STATE**

The PUCL report is released in press conferences in Indore (MP) and Delhi. The coverage in the Indore papers is extensive; this is a local issue and a team from the national capital carries weight. In Delhi, the press is busy covering the Assam government’s appeal for more armed forces to fight militancy in the state, so the MP report release is a tiny event. We have an appointment with the Home Minister to ask for an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation, but he cancels it after making us wait for two hours. We meet the National Human Rights Commission with the report. They make concerned noises, promise to send their own team to MP and ultimately do nothing beyond advising that the AMS petition the Supreme Court. We approach the Madhya Pradesh State Human Rights Commission, which visits the area six weeks later, by which time the police and the Congress have fabricated an entirely new story complete with witnesses, evidence and documents.
Their report recommends that adivasis must not fight amongst themselves. The National Commission for Women sent a team with commendable promptness to investigate the rapes, but could not trace many of the women who were still hiding. In October and November, solidarity rallies were held by supporting organizations in Indore, Sendhwa (Khargone district) and Delhi. However, the state sought to curb the MP rallies by prohibiting public meetings and detaining people who were going to participate. A talk show on television offered the AMS a chance to appear along with the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and to grill him on the ongoing repression. The AMS was quite satisfied with the way the programme had been recorded, with the Chief Minister clearly indicted for his government’s excesses. However, when the programme was broadcast, it was found to have been edited out of all recognition. The AMS’ charges were totally garbled and the Chief Minister had the last word every time. The AMS sounded confused and their grievances boringly dreary while the Chief Minister, seated at a height, gave bland assurances and exuded a general air of complacence.

There is a certain inevitability to all this. Do we seriously expect the Human Rights Commissions to take our side? Even if they do corroborate our version, they are toothless bodies that can only recommend government action, not order it. All the effort that we put into producing reports, pursuing things with ‘the authorities’, isn’t it a complete waste of time? The Supreme Court may give us a tiny reprieve, a hint of justice, and our flickering hopes leap up afresh, but cases drag on, evidence is impossible to collect and even if the investigating agency is the Central Bureau of Investigation, half of its officers are policemen on deputation. And the learned judges of the court rarely take to organizations like the AMS, low-key and unglamorous as they are. And, once again, the politics of what the AMS does is much too complex and too threatening to be easily intelligible.

Yet we persevere, engaging with the same sets of actors and institutions of the state, using our middle-class skills of report-writing and working the press and the judiciary. Are we challenging the state to live up to its own rhetoric of human rights or are we just getting co-opted into further buttressing the state’s legitimacy? This collaboration is a double-edged sword; even as the state displays its reasonable, judicial credentials and swallows up dissent in a maw of discussion, we push for real and not cosmetic concessions. By keeping up the clamour for justice, we are trying to keep the crisis going so that ‘normalization’ is postponed. Before it is back to business as usual, we hope to push aside a little more the unyielding weight of public opinion that makes criminals out of adivasis and Naxalites out of the AMS. At the end of the day, what has been achieved? The transfer of three district police and civil administration heads who supervised the action against the AMS and who are known for their proximity to the deputy Chief Minister. More important, the AMS has survived state repression. Many local people and the members of this mass organization have suffered intensely but, by and large, after a period underground, they continue to be publicly involved in its campaigns. This ability to endure, to keep fighting, is perhaps the most notable success of the organization.

CONCLUSION

The violence intrinsic to domination is embedded in the everyday practices of caste, capitalism and patriarchy. Its ubiquity is matched by its intangibility; it is everywhere experienced yet it is so difficult to capture in analysis. Violence leaves its imprint. It is written on the bodies of tribal women and men. It is written on the land that once bore a sorghum crop and now supports straggly teak, or lies under water. The scars on the bodies of adivasis and on the face of the land are only one reminder
of the sedimented histories of exploitation and struggle, of efforts to re-sculpt social relations. These scars brand particular bodies more than others—the adivasi rather than the non-adivasi, women more than men. The power of the state is always unequally exercised.

Both the struggles that we have examined in this paper, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, make violence visible. Both try to problematize categories and concepts such as tribe, forest, development and environment. Both show how violence is embedded in the categories themselves, produced by those in power. Some categories such as gender and tribe may have their roots in civil society, while those designating land use or development are primarily created by the state, but once created, the forms as well as the contents of these categories are contested through everyday practice and through extraordinary events. Violence, once considered to be either normal or even invisible, is made pathological.

While both these struggles challenge established lines of repression, they meet with very different responses from the state. In both cases, the state seeks to control popular resistance to violence-made-pathological through its apparatuses of repression, and an escalation into more violence-made-pathological, but the state’s ability to explain, absorb and neutralize pathology varies. Is the Narmada Bachao Andolan able to act more effectively because it has greater legitimacy as an ‘environmental’ movement? The Andolan’s public image is unambiguous; all complexity and nuance have been smoothed out to construct clear-cut identities—of non-violent peasants against the state. Also, within global environmentalism, the large dam is perceived to be unquestionably evil. Violence against the Andolan appears more pathological because it is directed against a movement that is widely supported by the intelligentsia. The Andolan is able to use its social capital like a shield that deflects violence, even causing it to boomerang upon the state. Victimhood itself becomes a mode of resistance.

The Adivasi Mukti Sangathan, on the other hand, has no strong public image; the only impression that the press has given off is of a somewhat disreputable set of adivasis, fighting among themselves, who may have Naxalite tendencies. The AMS has not been able to shrug off this stigma because it cannot construct neat heroes or a clear demonology. Its struggles against the state are either placed within the discourse of the feud, enabling the disciplining state to step in as arbiter and law-giver, or are tarred with the illegitimacy of Naxalite armed revolution, enabling the punitive state to unleash its full violent potential. The inability to make a case for the superiority of its ecological practices, and the failure to construct a unitary tribal identity for its members, undermine the AMS’ claims to environmentalism.

Can the varied state responses to the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan be explained in terms of the class character of their membership? Both campaigns mobilize groups that are socially vulnerable. Both rely on middle-class activists to forge links with supporters outside the area. Yet, the Andolan succeeds where the Sangathan does not. One factor that could shed light on the difference between the Andolan and the AMS is the nature of the state and capital that they address. The NBA does not embroil itself in local politics at the state level. How can it choose to remain aloof from the hurly-burly of local politics when it has a significant grassroots base? Perhaps the contrast lies in the fact that the AMS poses a threat to relatively immobile political and economic capital. A powerful AMS undermines vested interests in the area and they have nowhere to go, whereas the NBA targets a specific project with investment from a group of Indian and interna-
tional companies. They can cut their losses and leave; that is a cheaper solution than the hostile publicity of fighting a world-renowned social movement. So the Narmada Bachao Andolan gets the soft responses from the state—dialogue, negotiation and mild repression, while the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan bears the brunt of naked aggression. The environmentalism of the Andolan wins the day. The Sangathan’s aim of ‘tribal liberation’ must struggle against worse odds.

Despite these differences, both the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan take recourse to the same strategies of combining conflict with collaboration, petitioning the ‘good’ state while fighting the ‘bad’. This Janus-faced state is made to surrender some of its power—over bodies and lands, social and natural, in order to survive.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AMITA BAVISKAR is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Delhi. She is the author of *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1995).
Founded in late 1996, the **BERKELEY WORKSHOP ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS** emerged from a long-standing commitment to environmental studies on the Berkeley campus and from the presence of a core group of faculty whose research and scholarly interests linked environment, culture, and political economy. The workshop draws together over fifty faculty and doctoral students from San Francisco Bay Area institutions (the University of California campuses at Berkeley, Santa Cruz, and Davis, and Stanford University) who share a common concern with problems that stand at the intersection of the environmental and social sciences, the humanities and law. The Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics has three broad functions:

- to assist graduate training and scholarly research by deepening the theoretical and methodological toolkit appropriate to understanding environmental concerns in an increasingly globalized world;

- to bring together constituencies of local and international scholars, activists, and policy makers for transnational conversations on environmental issues; and,

- to bring community activists and policymakers to Berkeley as Residential Fellows, thus providing synergistic possibilities for developing new learning and research communities.

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