Globalization, Global Alliances and the Narmada Movement

The past decade has witnessed several significant regional and global efforts to build horizontal linkages that transcend national boundaries. Prior to this, most earlier non-governmental efforts were oriented either towards building inter-national solidarity (e.g. the Socialist International or the various Communist Internationals or the forums of the working class) or were single issue based (e.g. the women’s movement) or were regional (e.g. the solidarity efforts against imperialist intervention at home in many of the countries of central and South America).

This recent past has seen the evolution of very different transborder alliances – from hesitant efforts seeking small concessions from dominant and dominating institutions to initiatives that challenge global power interests, current patterns of economic development as well as cultural control. This brief note will concern itself primarily with the latter two since that is the evolving thinking within the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the Movement to Save the Narmada). (SEE ALSO KHAGRAM IN THIS VOLUME). Of course, global alliances like the ones that have been built around the struggles for justice in the Narmada Valley are still at a nascent stage since any significant challenge to dominant structures and the building of countervailing power requires a political coherence that movements, groups and party activists (the world over) still lack. But, it is clear from recent analysis and action in and around the Narmada movements, as well as the other cases in this volume, that the challenge is being increasingly recognized and the strategies of resistance and of articulating and building alternatives is actively on.

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1 This essay presents some brief reflections based on a long-term involvement in the Movement to Save the Narmada (Narmada Bachao Andolan). Since complete objectivity is in any case a contradiction in terms, I will only say that while the task of writing about a popular struggle that I am involved in requires some distancing from the “subject,” I cannot avoid the deeper levels of “subjectivity” that run through the paper. There will also, obviously, be differences between how I “read” the Andolan’s history, how it would like the history to be presented and how different participants in the Andolan understand it.

2 The NBA, while rooted in the Narmada River valley, is a national alliance of organizations jointly campaigning for justice in the valley. It was set up in 1988 to initially seek comprehensive rehabilitation for those displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in West-Central India. By August 1990, the NBA, recognizing the inability of the state and central governments to provide rehabilitation, decided to oppose the building of the project.

Before a specific discussion on the Narmada experience, it is critical to situate it in the larger context of globalization. It is also important to outline some issues that still seem to be neglected in the process of creating better coordination among and between emerging global alliances that are seeking a transformation of the dominant economic and political systems.

**The Wider Context**

Much of the alliance building around the Narmada issue has attempted to make the donor governments, transnational corporations seeking to invest in projects on the Narmada river and the World Bank accountable to international norms and to the international human rights regime. In the case of the World Bank, it is also to its own policies which on paper have evolved in directions which are much closer to social movement concerns than before (SEE NELSON THIS VOLUME)

However, recent thinking in the Movement – which is not equally shared by all the constituents of the alliance and thus, consequently, raises several crucial issues – recognizes that the World Bank and other Bretton Woods Institutions as powerful as they are, are still only the more visible symbols of a power configuration that is firmly embedded in the contemporary structures of corporate capitalism. The gulf between the extent of morality and responsibility that these institutions overtly display and what is actually internalized is therefore a function of this basic structural reality. There is therefore a growing belief that critiques and campaigns must evolve and strengthen strategies that challenge the structures themselves. In fact, at the moment, even if the World Bank were to be forced to shut down, in the absence of other structural changes in the global economic order, another similar institution/s would take its place.

These institutions are aligned in more or less the same way as the current configuration of economic (and military) power with the G7 nations (and the interests that they represent) dominating the hierarchy. Very few individuals involved in building horizontal linkages of citizens’ initiatives and people’s movements address the deeper systemic and structural issues. This is partly because so much energy is expended in the local space, in “fire-fighting” and in ensuring that some of the changes accepted by dominant institutions after an intense period of campaigning and advocacy actually get implemented. But partly it is also because the deeper questions are harder to deal with, they confront very fundamental aspects of our own lives and challenge us in turn by exposing our institutional and personal weaknesses. This is not to minimize the significance of efforts to hold

reflecting a vast range of concerns ranging from the horizontal networking inspired by the Chiapas movement to mobilizations against the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF (represented in no small measure by the activities of the People's Global Action); from the campaigns against the politics of transgenic seeds and biotechnology in general to the coordinated mobilizations of traditional fishworkers around the world. Additionally, there are several innovative networks that have built bridges between social movements and trade unions towards achieving a just and democratic development and fair trade practices. Notable examples are the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC) and the Alliance for a Responsible Trade (ART-US). All these initiatives also play a crucial role not just in building transnational linkages but also in providing critical solidarity to each other’s struggles.
those in power accountable. Each effort and each step forward helps create democratic space where
the potential to nurture political struggle is strengthened.  

The other challenge that those in the process of building these alliances must face is that while there
is a committed base and ample idealism within each participating movement or group, most efforts
are still dispersed, fragmented and scattered. Take for example the resistance in India against Cargill
or Monsanto (hybrid and transgenic seeds), Union Carbide (the Bhopal tragedy) and the Sardar
Sarovar Project. Not only is there very little coordination between groups and movements involved
in the opposition to the specific corporations and the dam project, there is little sustained work in
responding to the larger political threat that the current patterns of globalization are posing. (And
most groups now realize that strengthening the local alone is a necessary but insufficient condition to
resist the global.) This lack of political consolidation presents a major challenge to domestic and
transnational networks since the forces of national and transnational capital are increasingly
demonstrating significant coherence and consistency in their policies and practice.  

Many efforts to challenge the forces of transnational capital have met with criticism from within the
country. It is argued that focusing on global institutions that have an adverse impact on India detracts
from the more basic task of mobilizing within the country and of holding the Indian state accountable
to its social and Constitutional obligations as well as its obligations to the United Nations charter and
instruments to which it is a signatory. Additionally, the argument states that these critiques detract us
from the task of compelling the state to become an agency of controlling (or regulating) both global
capital and other destabilizing or disrupting political interests. While much of this is true, it can be
argued that the time has come to pursue both strategies – the national and the global – with better
coordination and transparency. 

Can this coordinated action across movements and concerned groups take place without radicalizing
political parties or participating in electoral politics? In most countries, both in the Third World and
the First World, groups have found the process of sensitizing political parties an enormously difficult
one. In countries that have a functioning electoral system, this limitation inevitably inhibits the
creation of public debate. The lack of response from parties is not just because their caste-class
affiliations obstruct or constrain a focused response to the threats – after all, many Third World


5 Among corporate and financial institutions, while normal competitiveness prevails, the regularity
and range of participation at the annual Davos Summit or the new Global Compact with the UN are
obvious examples of coordination. Many other joint strategic groups—within and across countries
and sectors have also been active. This sustained collaboration and coordination is not as common
among groups and movements challenging undemocratic and largely unaccountable corporate and
financial capital. The mobilizations in Seattle and the post-Seattle consolidation is a major step
forward in both creating this coordination but also creating the realization that as long as the broad
thrust of the mobilizations and networks is in convergence, a diversity of strategies, styles and tactics
with occasional soft coordination is all that is necessary at the moment.

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societies still have active socialist and Marxist parties. Granted, however, that with the end of the Cold War, any political strategy adopted by a political party has to contend with an even more aggressive capitalist enterprise and consequently, the task of convincing constituencies of the importance of an alternative vision is all the more difficult. Precisely because of this, the need for a deeper debate within parties regarding the dangers of predatory capital (both global and national and the tactical and strategic alliances between the two) and the adverse implications of greater dependency on undemocratic, secretive and unjust global institutions like the World Bank and the IMF continues to be urgent.

Equally, an overwhelming proportion of the poor and the oppressed as well as the victims of the development process are not organized and, in many ways, continue to depend on a patronizing political and economic establishment that can no longer deliver even the crumbs of the past. Similarly, the middle classes, both in the Third World and the First World are still largely oblivious not just of the role of the World Bank and the IMF in imposing a new hegemonic order but the real conditions, contexts and roots of poverty, ecological degradation and social injustice found within and across states.

Unfortunately, most Third World nation-states have been usurped by their ruling elites. A significant proportion of their bureaucratic, political and military elites are almost no better than agents and carriers of elites in the First World. This might seem like too strong a criticism but if we look at the evidence (despite occasional “hard lines” that are taken by Third World leaders), we can witness a growing affinity between elites across the world and a consequent distancing from the base of their own societies as well as from the struggles for social justice. This clearly reflects a decline in nationalistic idealism which continues to survive in a few scattered groups and, continues to have a persistent appeal for a significant proportion of the masses in the country who have, however, been confused and oppressed by obscure economic discourses and the rhetoric of progress and prosperity.

This task acquires more seriousness particularly since international economic institutions and national governments are becoming far more sophisticated in “dealing” with criticism and dissent. The large sums of donor money available for NGOs, the co-optation and ‘management’ of dissenting or alternative language (one of the best examples is the concept of ‘sustainable development’ – for within the present patterns of economic growth, sustainable development will remain an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms) as well as the possibilities for lucrative contracts and consultancies have effectively muffled and divided dissenting voices. Too much of active dissent is coopted, contained, or derailed, as a result, the roots of present political and economic control remain largely unaddressed. It is only in the past year that a renewed mobilization within and across borders is

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There has been an almost parallel progression of adverse social and environmental impacts of the current patterns of economic development and ‘anti-poverty’ programs. ‘Safety nets,’ ‘Social safety nets’ and poverty alleviation schemes continue to be introduced with little positive and sustained impacts. Most are designed primarily to temporarily mitigate extreme poverty or deflect the possibility of social unrest arising out of sustained social exclusion and want.
becoming evident and looking at its growth and the resulting nervousness among ruling elites and the dominant structures of governance, it is obvious that this countervailing process is beginning to take root. As it does, it will have to draw on the learning of the past and innovate new strategies and tactics of transnational engagement. This interplay and contestation will be one of the many crucial developments in the political and cultural landscape of the globe.

This landscape will also witness significant changes in political theory and action as global production, the mobility of global capital and finance and the creation of mega-corporations contest and even attempt to smother nationally bound labor-capital relations. The role of the state in these transforming relations as well as its reconceptualisation as capital seeks to use it for its ends and internal and transnational democratic forces pressure the state to democratize itself will also increasingly occupy political and social consciousness and action. At the moment, however, in the name of good governance, the dominant logic is that the state must embrace market-friendly policies, ensure a stable climate for global investment and implement massive programs of infrastructure development that facilitates free play to the neoliberal agenda.

All this – the changing face of dominant processes of globalization; the unity of ruling elites; the

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7 This is not to say that the defense of economic and cultural globalisation is universal among global elites. There are powerful currents in almost all Third World societies, and several First World ones which resist the logic and hegemony of globalisation and seek to protect both fundamentalist and progressive traditions. Karl Polanyi’s description of the "double movement" in 19th century Europe is relevant here. Nationally also, the resistance against the neoliberal agenda is growing and most do not have transnational linkages. For instance, in India, witness the efforts of the National Forum for Adivasi Self-Rule, the National Alliance of People's Movements and the Jan Vikas Andolan (Movement for People's Development), among others, that have protested against the privatization of tribal lands and the privileging of private actors over people's commons. What is important, however, is that the potential and role of domestic social and political forces (as they challenge the forces of capital) and the influence of these nationally bound struggles on the nature of transnational alliances and linkages should not be underestimated. Conversely also, transnational alliances often strengthen local social movements by providing a wider arena to pursue advocacy and political strategies that contribute to the democratization of society. The Chiapas movement in Mexico and its prioritization of this democratization is a powerful illustration of both these processes. Across the world, numerous innovations are now visible as national or local movements are forging alliances which provide solidarity, share information, strategies and even alternative blueprints of reorganizing and democratizing society. Two crucial lessons: One, the central need for transnational alliances to be rooted in local movements with the active participation of local communities, and two, the profound demand for a major restructuring of contemporary democratic institutions--from the local to the global.

8 One of the more eloquent prescriptive documents that propagates this worldview is the World Bank's World Development Report of 1997 that centers on the role of the state in an era of economic globalisation.
fragmentation and dispersal of popular movements; the lack of strategies to sensitize the political parties, the poor and the middle classes; the consequent decline of radical politics, the emerging mobilization and transnational alliances, and the innovation and creativity that is emerging in the debates and actions of those involved in building and strengthening transnational linkages – all this forms the backdrop to understand the building of the global alliance for justice and human rights in the Narmada Valley.

A Brief History of the Alliance
During the mid 1980s when the movement was gradually expanding its mass base and picking up momentum, the predominant strategy was to seek reforms from the state and central governments. It was believed that most issues could be resolved through a process of dialogue. Every avenue of pursuing this was explored and it became gradually evident that as far as the governments were concerned, the gap between rhetoric and practice was continuing to grow. A wide range of non-violent strategies were adopted and the country’s intelligentsia and political opinion makers as well as other democratic movements in the country were mobilized. This resulted in the generation of significant countervailing pressure that compelled successive Chief Ministers and Prime Ministers to meet with movement leaders. Assurances to resolve outstanding problems were secured from these political leaders. However, the end result of all these meetings was only to raise unfulfilled expectations.

It was during this time that several World Bank missions visited the valley. The mobilization of those to be displaced by the dam had created enough public awareness that the Bank could not easily disregard the organized voices of those who faced displacement and other issues of social and environmental impacts. Nevertheless, even the Bank was unsuccessful and unwilling to make its disbursements conditional on a demonstrated commitment by the various governments to implement policies that had evolved over the past two decades.9

Additionally, the Japanese government was evaluating its involvement in the project. The realization among NBA activists that the local and national campaign would have to extend itself beyond the national boundaries created intense debate within the movement. Should movement representatives go abroad to pressurize the Bank or could this be done from within? Since there was no discussion of an alliance then, should a relationship be forged with organizations based in the US, Europe and

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9 The history of resettlement legislation and policy is a fascinating and painful testament to the inability of the Indian State to adequately recognize the rights of those it displaces “in the national interest.” Its legislative responses also reflected the basic class and caste character that governed its decisions, despite its Constitutional obligations. The dialectic between mass mobilization and state response is another neglected area of contention. A similar gap exists between the World Bank’s policies and its practice on the ground. Its own internal reports are graphic testimony to gross violations of its own policies. See, i.e. the Wapenhans Report (commissioned by the then Bank President, Lewis Preston), June 1992 or the periodic Resettlement reviews.
What should the basis of such a relationship be, particularly since there were significant economic, cultural and social differences? Who should represent the movement? How should that representation be defined?

The first testimonies before sub-committees of the US Congress were organized by the Washington-based Environmental Defense Fund. One of the main leaders of the movement, Medha Paktar (see Khagram for a broader discussion of the creative role played by Paktar) and myself were among the first persons to make presentations on the adverse social and environmental implications of World Bank funding and the need for the US government to exercise its influence within the Bank to make it more socially and environmentally responsible in the context of the Sardar Sarovar Project.

Gradually, EDF as well as a wide range of US based organizations testified before the Congress and utilized a complex set of advocacy strategies to pressurize the Bank. In Japan, Friends of the Earth (Japan) launched a major campaign within the country. It organized two public hearings and Japanese academics, activists, and press correspondents made site visits in India. Most of them reported on the grave consequences of the project and on the vast gaps between promise and performance on the part of the governments and dam-building authorities. A media campaign, coupled with pressures on key members of the Japanese Diet (Parliament) and relevant central ministries created a public embarrassment for the government. Elsewhere in Europe, activist groups were meeting their parliamentarians and pressurizing their respective Executive Directors in the World Bank. By 1991, 60 percent of Swedish and 80 percent of Finnish parliamentarians had signed a memorandum to the president of the World Bank seeking a review of the SSP.

A series of unprecedented responses ensued. The Japanese government announced that it was withdrawing its commitment to provide loans to the SSP. The World Bank reluctantly announced that it was setting up, for the first time in its history, an independent review committee under the chairpersonship of Bradford Morse, who had recently stepped down as administrator of UNDP. Their Report was a pathbreaking document, which called on the Bank “to step back.” However, the Bank did not heed this recommendation and issued a note called “The Next Steps.” The collective pressure from the alliance was stepped up including issuing full page advertisements in major international newspapers signed by over 800 organizations from all over the world calling on the president of the World Bank to withdraw its funding. In less than a six months, the Indian government and the World Bank, recognizing that the Next Steps could not be satisfactorily implemented, decided on a face-saving decision—that the Bank should be asked to withdraw from the project. It was one of the first times that the Bank was compelled to withdraw from such a prestigious project that it had so vociferously and for so long defended.

Movement activists supporting the need to go beyond national boundaries were of the opinion that alliances with European and Japanese groups were crucial since the governments of these countries were members of the World Bank and sent influential citizens as their Executive Directors at the Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C.

It needs to be stressed here that much of this would not have been possible without the successful mass mobilization in the Narmada Valley. Estimates of the number of people in the movement range from 70-80 percent of those to be affected by the project. (Approximately 150,000 people in over 200 villages in the three state of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat).

By this time the global alliance had extended itself to other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. Newer strategies had to be planned to respond more rapidly to the growing human rights violations in the valley. One initiative that took shape in 1993 was the formation of an International Panel on Human Rights that has regularly sent a representative from the international human rights community to spend between a week and a fortnight to report, from the point of view of established human rights conventions and covenants, the violations taking place. One of the most difficult tasks for communities affected by the processes of globalization has been to make the representative institutions accountable to the international human rights regime. The World Bank and the IMF, even though formed under the UN continue to be diffident in respecting established standards. In fact, many within these institutions see the norms as a hindrance to the successful implementation of their structural adjustment programs and other institutional changes that they seek to create a viable global marketplace.

The alliance has gone on to challenge the involvement of corporatons and financiers in other projects in the Narmada valley. Many of the partnerships that have been forged in the process of the alliance building have led to solidarities on issues beyond the struggle against a cluster of dams.

Numerous questions have been raised in this process of building the alliance. Debates on governance and development policy within India have increasingly focused on the need to transform the very structures of power. In a class and caste based society, processes of economic globalization inevitably compound the loss of control of local communities over their resources and their lives, which may exacerbate conditions of social unrest and conflict or lead to the growth of insecurity among cultural and political identities. Without this control, any efforts to transform the dominant processes of policy making – nationally and globally – is an almost impossible task. (This underscores, as do the other articles in this volume, the necessity of attending simultaneously to both domestic and international processes when evaluating or responding to transnational networks).

In late 1999 and early 2000, the existing alliances were re-activated and new actors were brought in as the state of Madhya Pradesh went ahead with its decision to build another dam in the Narmada valley at Maheshwar. A US-based corporation, Ogden and German State guarantees to German corporate investments in the project were challenged. The German government was also compelled by an alliance of local and German NGOs to constitute an independent commission. The commission's report left little doubt about the apathy of local corporate partners and government officials to the plight of those to be displaced. It also documented the almost total opposition by local communities to the project. After some delays, the German government decided to withdraw its promised guarantees. Similarly in the US, a comprehensive campaign against Ogden has forced another independent investigation. See www.narmada.org for details of this process.
Secondly, to what extent can global alliances transit from seeking concessions from international institutions and national governments to concentrate on issues of social and ecological justice in both the First and the Third Worlds?

**Global Alliances: Some Challenges**

Like the NBA, more and more groups and movements from the Third World now feel that solidarities need to be created not just by expressions of compassion but in a climate of collective and individual self-introspection and change. Relationships should be marked not by a patronizing attitude but by a spirit of fellowship. This is more difficult than it sounds because even among alliance members there are significant class and privilege differences. Collectively molding an authentic alternative vision is an enormously arduous task. In fact, it is a much greater challenge for those in the First World who will have to fight greater personal battles than elites in our milieu. Additionally, for them, there is a further need to be rooted authentically within their own societies as indeed we need to root ourselves in ours. In fact, participation in global initiatives needs to move beyond the better known, more visible primarily elite activists.

All this calls for urgent political consolidation. Given the growing stirrings for justice and democracy all over the world, one of the biggest challenges for individual struggles and for nascent global alliances is to convert sentiment, anger and assertion against dominant institutions into effective and sustained political strategies. It also calls for a rethinking of rigid ideological orientations and exhibiting greater humility to the task of building a broad democratic front that does not imply the submergence of plural institutional identities. The collective task of politicizing diverse constituencies – in both the North and the South – is now as urgent as ever.

It also presents challenges for a new vision of universalism – a universalism that does not impinge on smaller identities and pluralistic structures and which, in turn, is not impeded by the struggles of the same. Stated differently, the challenge is how to build international solidarities and links toward a holistic, universalistic world view which does not impede the cultural flowering of diverse identities – a process that not only reverses the cultural aggression and hegemonic thrust of dominant institutions, but strengthens the fabric of pluralism, diversity and justice.

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