

**Ruet, Joël**, Mr, Acad, Political Economy United Kingdom, "*The political meaning of a river - Intellectuals and Economy of Knowledge around the Narmada*"-E

Today's activist movements have various terrains – the local, the less material “national opinions”, the highly diffuse “global” and its opinions together with their institutions. Activist movements all have respective “conscientising” agendas, which are therefore information-based. Being set in these *various* networks of groups and sympathies, knowledge has reached a rather ambiguous status. Indeed, ‘knowledge in the fight’ is always construed, mostly through two main systems. One can be coined as, say, the data-information-symbolism. In this ‘Information Age’ approach, the fact that information is not given per se, but produced specifically to a political agenda is occulted. On the other hand, we have the text-culture-ideology of the ‘Global Village’, that revolves around an implicit myth of commonality of issues, stakes and struggles all over the world, whatever the cultural specificities. This needs being explored, and mythologies, be they in the intellectual or political terrain, must be unearthed. For we know since Foucault how knowledge conveys power, the economy of knowledge production-and-dissemination is central. Indeed, production and dissemination of information are not neutral and they rather influence and structure each other: the social groups, strategies and legitimization narratives linked to both processes not only relate, but they nurture each other. Economy of knowledge, in as much as it articulates Communication processes in a play with different stages, would form the analytical locus of this contribution; its illustrative focus being the intellectual and the flows of information which constitute the backbone of the anti-Dam Narmada Movement.

Movement, dissemination, participation, knowledge as networks, are all about politics and serve its constantly renewing and reshaping existence. For the anti Narmada dam struggle is exemplary of the diversification of communication means of activist organisations in India, for it is exemplary of the broadening of the action of non-party political movements, the Narmada case vests a large representativity of the Indian political scene. In this, both its spatial coverage and time length add. As we deal with politics indeed, it has to be defined, and the philosophy of politics will serve as our spinal cord throughout this reflection.

Especially, in this latter frame, the figure of the intellectual will be questioned, for she/he<sup>1</sup> is the prominent bearer of the communication *about* and *of* the Narmada, for she/he has allowed the river to substantiate itself and subjectivise into a discourse and further into an *acting*, therefore *political*, reality. True enough, the ‘anti-dam’ intellectual has meanwhile communicated *on* oneself, maybe also, for oneself as the latest developments might seemingly show. This is the critique some prominent figures among the dam supporters are raising. And the key question is indeed, in the nexus of communication processes, to know which structure of the economy of knowledge and representation of politics that intellectuals as a group do unearth. And through this, to know which emergence of which underground levels of the social structure in the Narmada valley they reveal, if any.

Indeed, the communication process at stake is far from being reified, but is dynamically embedded into power structures, ideologies, solidarities. That way, communication constitutes the politics. Politics reveals and realises the meaning of the discourses in place. The comprehension of the nature of politics with respect

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<sup>1</sup> The Narmada intellectual is tentatively less a she/he of politically correct social sciences than a real she, when emblematic figures like Medha Patkar, Arundati Roy, Jharana Jhaveri fight for ‘mata’ Narmada. Even more, one knows that the cultural environment of adivasis in the Narmada basin, as well as in any river basin in India, is embedded in a halo of sacredness. This links the river and the figure of the mother, through the nourishing elements the former provides. This is the myth of ‘Mother Ganga’, ‘mother Narmada’ that around and since independence time, has further been developed through the related myth of ‘mother India’ (see the article by Vibod Parthasarthy in the present book). Narmada’s children, accordingly, are for a steady half of them, women, who, according to many gender-concerned NGOs, carry the ‘closest’ relationships with the river.

to Narmada requires then being inscribed within political philosophy. This is the aim of section I, dealing with the signification of politics as being about the rights of the alienated. In section II we analyse the communication networks as structures of power, that revolve around the anti-dam protests. That is to say, communication as simultaneously revealing and shaping politics. In section III we conclude with the centrality of the tribals in the Indian democratic communication.

#### I. Autonomy/ Heteronomy of politics, and the organic intellectuals: Gramsci *via* Balibar

The Narmada debate, apparently, is about facts. These are known but, sadly enough, differently known by different 'experts'. Indeed, so-called 'facts', but also counter-facts and communication by 'experts', involve their situational subjectivity, on the first place of which is their ideological position on the aims and contents of development policies. For this reason, we will propose political philosophy as a framework of further analysis, and firstly detail what shall be understood by the concept of politics.

##### *Whose Narmada: 'facts' for describing or ascribing?*

The foundation stone of the first large dam over the Narmada was inaugurated in 1961 by Nehru, opening a new series among those of the "temples of modern India", as Nehru used to call them. A project comprising a total of 29 large dams (out of which the culminating 'Sardar Sarovar' being initially planned for a steady 138 m), complemented with countless small works, had become the new destiny of a river. Irradiating figure of (implicitly: the) modernity, the dam as a temple has its worshippers: it is to provide electricity, water for cities, as well as for irrigation. Numerous Governmental progress reports, as well as mind-boggling laudative declarations of otherwise discredited politicians, just pile up. The question of the beneficiaries is hardly addressed, however, as often in the Indian "mythology of the public" (see Ruet, 2002), and as recalled with figures by Racine (2001) or Arundati Roy's essays<sup>2</sup>. Urban beneficiaries are not every city dwellers, but the share of urban people actually connected to water and electricity networks, that is, the few residential colonies unaffected by the plague of recurring cuts (see Ruet, 2001 & 2003). On the rural side, due to the persistence of a large socio-economic divide, beneficiaries of any rural project usually are the rural rich (see Shiva, 1992, World Bank, 2001). On the opposite side of the social ladder, Racine (2001) recalls that, and on the overall post-independence dam policy, 62% of the affected population was constituted by tribals + scheduled castes (when they represent 24.5% only of the total population). Worse, tribals alone are a 47% of the affected population<sup>3</sup> (for 8.5% of the total population). Is it that tribals have this tendency to live where dams have to come, or just the reverse? Actually, this latter provocative statement nevertheless throws light on some post-colonial resounding within the Indian psyche. No one less than the former President of India, R.K. Narayanan, has once declared, referring to colonial times that, unlike "the British imperialists (who) had gone around the world damming rivers and damning peoples, (we should) take every possible care to see that the impact of dams we build is not ruinous to our tribal brothers and sisters"<sup>4</sup>. This opens up a key feature of the debate: how many people are concerned by the Narmada projects? In 1979, the number of families was officially estimated to be of 6,000<sup>5</sup>. Today's official figures are varying between 40,000 and 41,500 families, depending on the sources. They happily climb to 1.2 million people for the 'total project', according to the activist Medha Patkar. It is to be noted here, that 'officialesse' (bureaucrats, developers) enjoy the softness of 'family' statistics, while activists handle the roughness of appalling immensity of masses<sup>6</sup>. The units used – family vs. people – already tell a lot. Looking at these figures, the standpoint we adopt from here necessarily goes beyond the quarrel of experts: arguing on the level of water, the number of Megawatts, the surface to be irrigated, just looks missing the

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<sup>2</sup> Racine quotes the figures of 15.000 sq. km of irrigated land and 2000 MW of electric generation for Madhya Pradesh based dams, to be added to the 21000 sq. km and 1450 MW of the Sardar Sarovar project, situated in Gujarat.

<sup>3</sup> As far as the Narmada project is concerned, the proportion of tribals in the affected population is of 100% for the submergence zone comprised in the State of Gujarat, 100% for the zone in Maharashtra, and 30% for Madhya Pradesh. Source: The Hindu, December 16, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The Hindu, December 11, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Under this socio-economic contexts, a family can represent 5 persons in average.

<sup>6</sup> With an average family size of 5 persons in India, family figures are always much lower than people numbers.

point. These may be arguing elements, but the rhetoric, but the debate, but the political stake is about people.

In the actual vastness of approximates, in the odd fakeness of so polishly precise estimates, where have the people disappeared? Communicative logics have gained the stage and become the master of the play. How can the people from both sides, beneficiaries as well as evicted ones, express their very existence as citizens, where the numbers are unknown (whatever be the numerical value of this number), or unacknowledged? Further, how can the fighting armies of the 'pros' and the 'against' be reconciled from so diverging basis? How are these figures created? Used? Representing an emerging political reality? The experts quarrel has to be dialectically resolved through the (to become common) central question of the number, identity, attributes of these 'affected populations', which are presently also affected and very dismissed by their positioning not only in a statistical no-man's land by the government, but also in a statistical battlefield by the activists. Of course, this is all the more complicated by the fact that the State of Gujarat will mostly benefit from the Sardar Sarovar project, while the States of Maharashtra and even more Madhya Pradesh are the first to host the social consequences. The pragmatic question is therefore ultimately on the positionality of people as a meaning and criteria of Indian politics.

*Political philosophy: a politics for and by the alienated*

For politics to solve a quarrel<sup>7</sup>, politics has to exist as a shared discursive process and, moreover, this process has to be thought *as being the politics*. To get to this point, let us take a larger perspective. Balibar (1997), in his political philosophy, analyses politics as the articulation of three concepts (related to three ethical dynamics):

- the autonomy of politics (related to the ethical figure of emancipation), which address the aim of politics: the change for the alienated,
- the heteronomy of politics (meaning the conditions in which the transformation takes place), as politics embedded into historical heritage, processes and material conditions. That way, the heteronomy of politics arises from two main factors, that are the Marxian socio-economic structures<sup>8</sup>, but also the structures of power that the works of Foucault analyse, and where we will locate the nature and political significance of the discourse and of the means of communication,
- And as a reminder the heteronomy of the heteronomy of politics (ultimately related to the human dimension of the politics: the civility), which we won't address here.

Balibar underlines the first essential concept of politics, its *autonomy*, as the fact that politics firstly refers to a universal to be sought, more than to institutions or powers. This is the underlying definition that we shall keep for the analysis of the existence of communicative processes, and hence of politics in India. Choosing this definition will also have the advantage that it strongly relates to the conscientising objective of the groups we analyse. Further, for them, the issue at stake is really to build a political process whose essence is to seek for an *autonomous*, normative goal. In the meantime this process occurs in the very context of a whole history of debate on developmentalism. Looked at that way, the Narmada project as a part of the developmentalist debate does constitute an heteronomy that we cannot neglect in this process of political construction. Balibar details: "The autonomy of politics (in this sense that it represents a process with no origin or aim but itself, or what we shall call the citizenship) is not conceivable without the autonomy of its subject, and this autonomy in turn is nothing else than the fact for the people to 'make' himself, in the same time as the individuals who compose the people grant themselves fundamental rights"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Or, at a preliminary stage, for a quarrel to develop upto the stage of politics.

<sup>8</sup> As Balibar analyses, the political practice, for Marx, implies that « social relations (the conditions) have a history, of which meaning is precisely explained by the dynamic of the economic process ». In French, "les rapports sociaux (les conditions) ont une histoire, dont le sens s'explique précisément par la dynamique du procès économique » (Balibar, 1997 : 30). As well, the history of social struggle and the level of class consciousness do matter, as for instance the works of Claude Lefort analyse.

<sup>9</sup> In French: " L'autonomie de la politique (en ce sens qu'elle représente un processus n'ayant d'origine et de fin que lui-même, ou ce qu'on appellera la citoyenneté), n'est pas concevable sans l'autonomie de son sujet, et celle-ci en retour n'est pas autre chose que le fait pour le peuple de se 'faire' lui-même, en même temps que les individus qui le composent se confèrent des droits fondamentaux' » (p. 22).

As an enabler of such a process, autonomy of politics solely can allow the existence of the communicative networks we are trying to unearth. Politics actually proves as a process once construed as a universal by citizen-type people. Or, in other words, when it relates to a “politics of human rights articulated to a philosophy of democracy” (Raynaud, 1999, on Balibar, 1997). Looking at the Narmada problem under this philosophical perspective will thus mean, *inter alia*, a *dépassement* of the mere politics of vested interests<sup>10</sup>. But let us elaborate further on the concept of autonomy, to see how communication processes connect to it. In order to *do* (and thus to think) politics, the practical (thus as well as theoretical) question that emerges is on the nature of the class that will bear the historical legitimacy of politics-as-a-universalism. In Marxian and Balibar’s philosophy, this legitimacy is carried by the class which will be the guarantee against inequality. De facto as well as in action, this responsibility is borne by the class struggling against inequality in the access (by everybody) to identified rights beyond vested interests. The *sense* and the *perception* of the universal is carried and represented by the identity of the class that perceives itself, feels itself as the representative of this universal. In Marxian philosophy, only the alienated class is instrumental in this: it is alienated therefore universal, as being in the best position to defend these rights as the very proof and illustration that rights are defended for the universal, beyond mere corporatism, but rather in a manner ‘political’ in essence. Indeed, and quoting Rancière, the issue is to address the “share of the shareless”<sup>11</sup>.

*Autonomy in front of the dam: the right to live*

Let us now take the risk to operationalise political philosophy. Name one of these rights, for instance, the right to live in India, and there comes the meaning of this theory in analysing dams in India. This allows specifying the definition of the ‘right to live’. Especially, one can disentangle between the right to live in traditional land deemed to be submerged on one hand, and the right to get electricity and water through a dam on the other hand, and we no longer so much get the usual stakeholders opposed face-to-face in the discourse of the State and the activists in the Narmada case, which is only the surface of things, but rather an analytical situation where all parties actually articulate and construct systems of proof around their own conception of the ‘right to live in India’. The way to dialectically clinch the debate, is with the concept of the ‘universal class’ projected, in subjectivity, as an *actual*<sup>12</sup>. Then, the most ‘shareless’ people are evicted people. The preservation of their rights contents the guarantee of the liberty and equality in the Indian society and therefore they historically *are* the universal class, though they do not enjoy the hegemony<sup>13</sup>. The articulation and the defence of their rights is the key issue of the existence of politics (in a universalistic conception) in India.

The actuality of the struggle of the alienated class is central, and this can practically be studied by no other means, than through the very processes around which it revolves. But this however leads to what Balibar theoretically articulates as the second concept of politics: its heteronomy. If the people ‘makes’ itself, it does so within an economically, socially, culturally *given* environment. How do, on one hand, the necessary autonomy of the consciousness and action of the universality as politics, and on the other hand, this heteronomy to the given, relate? In the Narmada context, what is the given, where from can politics start and convey a universalistic dimension? If structures change and follow a path, then, for Marx, the political practice is already inscribed within a process. And, as Balibar specifies, “politics is therefore not the simple change of conditions, as if it were possible to isolate them, and to abstract oneself from them to gain power on them. But it is in fact the change within the change, the differentiation of the change”<sup>14</sup>. He details that

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<sup>10</sup> However, these will also be covered by the concept of heteronomy of politics, and, for they are part of the Narmada world, the communication around these interests will be at the heart of the communication processes we will study.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted p. 23, from: *La méésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Ed Galilée, Paris, 1995. Balibar puts the (acting) existence of such a class (actively) defending such rights, as the necessary condition of politics.

<sup>12</sup> That is, as a subjective criteria, and not as a truth à la Foucault, related to the objectivity of power. This subjective criteria as well as the way it objectively connects to materialism is further discussed later on.

<sup>13</sup> Or, rather, *because* they do not enjoy the function of the hegemony.

<sup>14</sup> “la politique n’est donc pas le simple changement des conditions, comme s’il était possible de les isoler et de s’en abstraire, pour avoir prise sur elles, mais est le changement dans le changement, ou la différenciation du changement ».

this « differentiation of the change (...) implies that the sense of history is only fixed in present »<sup>15</sup>. In the ‘interstice’, in the tiny place between the materialist structures and the progressive norms, is an area of undetermination and invention. There *is* and revolves politics.

Now that this definition is given and this theoretical framework is specified, can we besides give an operative criterion for assessing the actuality of politics in the Narmada case? The technical means in ‘operationalising’ this theory, we believe, is not direct. Indeed, by nature, the scenario of change in the conditions of politics is difficult to know. Then, evolving the referents to practically assess the differentiated change, becomes a subtle task. We argue, this necessarily implies at a first level the identification of an objective to serve as a reference in the external analysis. That may be stylised either as ‘stop the dam’, ‘ensure a real rehabilitation’, ‘ensure availability and transparency of information’ or any other one as long as it is (i) formulated and commonly shared, and (ii) acknowledged as a feature towards which benchmarking the ‘result’ of action. The analysis of these mottos in the anti-dam movement actually constitutes the central Section II of this article<sup>16</sup>. But, more importantly, a second level is needed, which is the specified ethical perspective on politics, which lies at the root of the action, and that only is able to colour the process as *political*.

To be clear, let us add that the perspective needs not being teleological, but must address the antagonism that subjects the considered social class. Following Tosel’s presentation of Gramsci’s philosophy<sup>17</sup>, and inasmuch the concerned class has the consciousness of this antagonism, the issue is whether it will be, as a class, either able to confront the necessity, or succumb to it. At the theoretical level, we equate this needed perspective to the consciousness of the historical function of the (alienated) universalistic class, while this practically materializes into a class-shaped internally organised fight towards this objective, to serve as a goal, for the people to ‘confer to themselves rights’, the way Balibar describes it. If we believe that this consciousness, simultaneously articulated to the reality of a (given) heteronomy, is the right way to practically address the actuality of politics, then the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual is appropriate. In other words, we believe this concept can serve operationalising the analytical framework we have adopted, and we are left with searching for the existence of an organic intellectual in the Narmada fight.

#### *In search of an organic intellectual for the Narmada*

Let us now detail in which perspective we will consider the effectivity of the political desalienation of the Narmada dweller. If he/she has to “emerge at the surface of history”<sup>18</sup>, there have to be intellectual relays, to provoke and convey (towards the state and the political sphere) this consciousness of their own existence as a class, homogeneity, and function. In Gramsci’s political philosophy, the function to involving the productive forces is carried by the intellectual. The intellectual is the mediator between the various classes and the State seen as the apparatus of the hegemonic class. This mediation is twofold and not exempt with a certain amount of ambiguity. At the same time, according to Gramsci, the intellectual carries and transmits the hegemonic functions of the leading class, but thereby puts the other classes in its contact, thus conscientising them. If we follow this analytical scheme, our question articulates as follows: what is the role of intellectuals in the Narmada fight, how do they relate to global intellectuals, to the local class, how does their communicative channels shape the class consciousness? How do they shape the class’ perception (and therefore surfacing) of the people’s historical function? And, importantly enough, can the existing (urban traditional) intellectuals be able on his own to produce a differentiated change in this process? Or, on the contrary, is there for the Narmada class any need of organic intellectuals, more strictly defined as having emerged out of a kind of “specialization of some partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type to which the new social class has given birth” (Gramsci, id.)? In that respect, communicative actions by tribals reflexively drawing upon their cultural practices might serve such a purpose, most likely, and given the initial conditions, *in relation* with intellectuals from an original urban background. In other words, the process lies in the relationships and dialectics between different degrees of intellectual activity. By ‘degree’,

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<sup>15</sup> « La différenciation du changement (...) fait que le sens de l’histoire n’est fixé qu’au présent ».

<sup>16</sup> The discussion of the ‘right’ analytical and ‘political’ objective is left for a later stage in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> p.17

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from “The question of the intellectuals, the hegemony, politics”, Cahiers de prison, p. 240)

we imply no idea of a hierarchy, but (i) the time share people have between intellectual and manual work, and (ii) capacities and modes of intellectual articulations (myths, stories, symbols, and so on). Hence the importance to assess the positionality of the urban intellectual in this whole set of intellectual articulations. This will be the central concern of Section III.

In conclusion to this framework, and in order to define in a more operative manner the category of organic intellectuals, let us examine what should be the social function they would fulfil in the framework we have evolved. If we practically look at how conscientising the alienated class *as a class* and as a class-understanding-its-ascribed-position-within-the-Indian-society (as well as the possibility to evolve this ascription), then the a priori definition of this intellectual we are looking for can be quite open as far as his means and techniques, ways of expression, and modes of communication are concerned. The modes can actually all the more vary that the process itself will actually be the determining factor: for Gramsci, “the relationship between intellectuals and the world of production is not immediate, as it is the case for fundamental social groups”. He specifies that it is “mediate” (in the sense of mediated). Different elements generate this mediation, relevant from the whole social fabric. However, Gramsci qualifies the role of the organic intellectual as the one of a “builder, organizer, permanent persuader” (ibid, p.244). Dealing with a rural/mostly-tribal class, the direction is structurally set large open, we believe, towards the tribal intellectual.

We can now analyse communication processes that revolve around Narmada within a set perspective: the connection between the urban intellectual and the information-flows, the extent of emergence of the tribal intellectual, and the type of dialectics between them, if any.

## II. Intellectuals in the networks of knowledge: the dam within the heteronomy of global activism

Everyone has his own story to tell about Narmada, and each one serves a specific communication strategy. There is nothing such as one single story about the Narmada. There are at least the official version on one hand (with again its several variants<sup>19</sup>), and various forms of different activist group’s stories on the other hand (with its sometimes naïve alterations or approximates<sup>20</sup>). Besides, we shall see in next section that the inter-NGOs stories discrepancies recover more profound antagonisms. Since our aim is to articulate the discourse and its communicative processes to the people, with reference to the ethical concept of politics that we have taken as a yardstick, we need not balancedly compare the details of each type of story here. We even need not assert the ‘superiority’ in terms of ‘truth’ of one on the other, for there is no objective criteria to be retained. Instead, we will rather analyse the mechanisms of truth-making of the NBA story. However, since (i) the anti-dam movements themselves situate the meaning of their action into political representation and (ii) the public position has been criticised at length, we will address in this section the communicative relevance and political significance of the ‘antis’<sup>21</sup>, in the perspective set-up by Foucault.

### *Intellectuals in the networks of knowledge*

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<sup>19</sup> Among several other documented publications on the whole project, D’Souza (2002) well shows the appalling inefficiency of the State, its failure to catch the social consequences of the project, its many withdrawals, compromising, or voluntary neglect of important aspects or even public information, like the Morse report, released by the World Bank in 1992. He, in other words, analyses what Patel (1997) calls the “historically proven low credibility and ineptness” of the Indian State.

<sup>20</sup> In their ‘communiqué’ dated 6<sup>th</sup> August 1999, for instance, the Friends of the Earth (‘amis de la terre’), ‘testify’ around pleasant ideas and sympathetic categories: over a few days NBA rally (which as far as it is concerned had a real political meaning since rooted in the long term action), they have ‘verified’, received ‘testimonies’, ‘without the intermediary of the NBA’. What ‘*the* peoples directly concerned have *re-affirmed*’... when the very problem is that nobody knows who and how many they are. Anyway, the friends of the earth have ‘transmitted their support to the local populations’. Source of the quotes: [www.amisdelaterre.org](http://www.amisdelaterre.org)

<sup>21</sup> Further, though out of scientific ground, the author feels sympathetic for such an involvement and recalls a conversation with one NBA leader, before being invited to join the ‘anti’ rally. Having explained that, with a technical background and a past of training in ‘loving dams’, the author wanted to join and see with both an open and critical mind, the reply had been that he should ‘therefore all the more join’, rightly *because* being a product of a dam-loving education.

For Foucault (1980), “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power (...), truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power”. He specifies that “each society has its régimes of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as truth; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true”.

As far as the Narmada is concerned, typically, the questions are: Does the number of protesters prove the truth of a cause? How do the various protagonists/story tellers such as government officials and NGO activists, acknowledge each other’s degrees of legitimacy in stating figures? Especially, how does this depend upon the debated issue such as the number of oustees, the rehabilitation schemes, the technical characteristics of the dam, its electricity generation, its irrigative capacity? In short, how is any ‘truth’ produced, stamped as ‘scientific’, transmitted, consumed, and under whose control? Here Foucault mentions the significant role of the “political and economic apparatuses” such as university, army, writing, and media (all quotes, p 131-3). In this very economy of knowledge, both the nature of the agents and of their communicative channels are essential. Hence communication is never neutral. Through the forms it adopts, it already incorporates and *performs* a political vision. Indeed, and in accordance with our presentation of politics, production of communication on political issues already materialises a change in the interstice we have mentioned.

As an illustrative example, the concept of development conveys the centrality of the State in the process, and any communication about the benefits of these forms of development serves as a legitimation and reinforcement of this political centrality of the State<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, even the concept of participation, its critiques argue, still conveys the same centrality of the power of the State as the source of legitimacy, simply putting the call for participation of people as a make-up in place of local democracy<sup>23</sup>. In this latter case, according to Kothari (1984), the concept of participation simply brings another form of legitimisation by the academia. In contrast, for Kothari, the concept of *rights* refers to social movements and the dynamic of struggle as a system of autonomous truth-making. Potentially all three different systems (development, participation, rights) of truth-making exist in the case of Narmada, borne by different ‘story tellers’. This is directly connected to the concept of heteronomy of the politics, in the sense that, for Balibar (1997 : 30), “the political practice is inspired from within (from its own forces, described as “productive forces” and as “social consciousness”) in the flow of a change that has always already begun”<sup>24</sup>. If this latter quote rightly articulates the autonomy to the heteronomy, it nonetheless details the embeddedness of change *within* an already existing evolution, it illustrates the *differentiated change*. In that respect, knowing the very context of the evolution of the social and political thinking, practices and means of justification in India at the time of the Narmada will be central to understand where lies the politics in the anti-dam protest. Indeed, Balibar (p. 33) directly characterises the place of heteronomy in the works of Foucault: “(In Foucault’s theorisation), the distance between the conditions and the transformation is reduced to the minimum: they become contemporary one to another”, he details, “in a *present* at the same time ontological, ethical, and political”. Ultimately, “the relation of power is constituting” (p. 34)<sup>25</sup>. Autonomy and heteronomy are linked in a dialectical manner.

In that context, the intellectual is at stake with the system, with “the institution”. Foucault states in *Power/Knowledge*, that “(the intellectual) is the person occupying a specific position (linked) to the general functioning of an apparatus of truth. (...) There is a battle ‘for truth’, or at least ‘around truth’ (being

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<sup>22</sup> In our case, an illustrative example can be taken from the Supreme Court of India today has in these matters.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. in this book the study by Guy Poitevin on “submissive participation or cooperative democracy”.

<sup>24</sup> “La politique s’insère de l’intérieur (à partir de ses propres forces, décrites comme “forces productives » et comme “conscience sociale”) dans le cours d’un changement qui a toujours déjà commencé”.

<sup>25</sup> Respectively: “la distance entre les conditions et la théorisation (y) est réduite au minimum : elles deviennent contemporaines les unes de l’autre », « dans un *présent* à la fois ontologique, éthique, et politique », « la relation de pouvoir est constituante ».

understood as) ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects on power attached to the true’<sup>26</sup>. Then the very function of intellectuals is to throw light on parts of the production system. Within the NBA, for both the urban as well as the tribal intellectual, this implies, under respective forms of communication, shedding light on the mechanisms of labelling of true and wrong the State uses. However, at the second level, the urban NBA intellectual is himself articulated to an institution (this is at the heart of the Gramscian critique). His own power is partly rooted in mechanisms of identification (titles, distinctions) from where he speaks as a *labelled* intellectual. Hence the source of its internal contradiction<sup>27</sup>, that we will explore now.

*Who appropriates the story? NBA’s vs. global activist’s dam*

Let us now recall *the particular* story that the NBA propels, in order to exemplify the nexus between communication and intellectuals. We will be, in that respect, much more concerned with the ways and means the NBA uses to develop and expand its story. Central to it, is a foundation myth. It mentions the origin as the federation, in the 1980s and around the totemic figure of Medha Patkar<sup>28</sup>, of several formerly distinct NGOs. The ‘NBA coalition’, to simply become the NBA, was born, working on resettlement policies for the tribal people. It was soon after radicalised (in 1988), again around the central figure of Medha Patkar, to be reborn as an anti-dam movement this time, radically contesting the very idea of resettlement to contest the displacement itself, the contextual reasons of which are analysed in next section. On NBA’s website, the principles for making truth adopt an ‘authority principle’ communication system. Take an example. On press release dated April 2, 2001 (NBA, 2001)<sup>29</sup>, beyond the contents, articulates a justification process through referring to the “eminent writer” Arundati Roy, and the “noted film-maker” Jharana Jhaveri. Further in the text appear a “retired Justice”, an “advocate in the supreme Court”, an “ex-commissioner”, a “national secretary”, a “secretary general”. When titles and official identifications are missing, we get a socialist “leader”, and a “noted” theatre activist. Indeed, this communication strategy is addressed to the multilateral agencies, and therefore aims at showing how the movement, despite dealing with the rights of uneducated and alienated people is however directed by ‘serious’ people. The movement adopts this self-projection to show its being at par with their interlocutors in the multilateral agencies, post-graduated from the highest schools in the world. This is the way to take in confidence these ‘bearers of knowledge’ that constitute the staff of the World Bank, and lead them to carry counter-inquiries. Here is a process of ‘*justification of the equals*’ targeting the ‘*rehabilitation of the subalterns*’. And this is actually partly these arguments that work and make the NBA action succeed in bringing multi-lateral agencies to reassess the situation. This is this kind of communication that leads, for instance the UN Commission on Human Rights to depute a “Special Rapporteur” (The Hindu, 11<sup>th</sup> August, 2001). The special rapporteur can address the “landless and the alienated”, through the medium of the “eminent activists.”

The second communicative strength of the NBA movement derives from its ability to catch the attention of the middle-class and politicians in Indian metropolis. An illustration of this is the “rally by Narmada’s children” (The Hindu, Wednesday, August 22, 2001), where a 70 tribal children from affected villages from Madhya Pradesh met school children in major towns of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat on the way to Delhi, to finally camp on the highly symbolic India Gate in Delhi, facing the presidential palace. Here again the symbolic value of this location, when the rally camps at the window of the guardian of the nation, carries an element of justification. On yet another symbolic mode, calling on the figure of a leader of the national consciousness, the “noted activist” Baba Amte has given his blessings<sup>30</sup> at the departure of the rally, the press recalls, while the children have gained an extra legitimacy in the sense that they are “students” of an

<sup>26</sup> Power/knowledge, pp. 131-3, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> This question relates to the old leftist question of the *function of direction*, which we will not detail here.

<sup>28</sup> Again, here the aim is not to judge but to notice that her figure has been erected as a figure, whose meaning goes beyond herself. Space is lacking, but the study of functioning processes and progressive constitution of the circles that have erected her to such a level would make sense.

<sup>29</sup> [www.narmada.org](http://www.narmada.org)

<sup>30</sup> In another rally, that this times was bringing ‘urban intellectuals’ to the tribal villages, and to which we participated, a meeting with baba Amte was organised. After a long while, he came and lied under trees on a ‘charpai’, wherefrom he addressed the urban crowd in a truly Gandhian set-up, filled with self-absorption and pious respect.

NBA-run school, and that they “represent children of 245 villages affected by the Sardar Sarovar Project”. Again, “personalities” were present, and “pledged solidarity with them”. But the ultimate significance of communication is also reflected in the feedback by the media, which impact on the minds of the urban middle class. In three days time in the press, the children lose their central status, regained again by the personalities. The Hindu (Saturday, August 25, 2001) declares that “it was Ms. Arundati Roy who virtually led a spirited protest march and addressed a public meeting in support of the 70-odd tribal children from the Narmada Valley who are in the capital these days”. The very fact that she addressed a public meeting has taken precedence, in the press’ eyes, over the long march of the children, who just happen to be here, these days, in ‘our’ town. The figures, too, had in-between endured their fate, since The Hindu reports a 40,000 people declared as affected by the UN report, while Arundathi declares them to be “four lakh oustees”. It seems facts do not matter in the Narmada case.

What the ‘anti’ story does not mention is that the mythic birth has also come out of other NGOs parting from the NBA views that no kind of relocation could be acceptable. NGOs like ARCH-Vahini<sup>31</sup>, that work in relationship with the State, have further constantly devoted their line of argument around bettering the resettlement conditions through a mix of pressure upon and cooperation with the State. This different conception of the right to be fought for (right to stay in the traditional living place at any cost, that is conveyed by the anti-dams, vs. right to be properly resettled somewhere else) shapes the whole representation and ground of the vision of the world supported by the respective proponents. Out of this, the universalistic vision of the Narmada politics is no longer necessarily co-evolved. Neither self-labelling nor self-advertising oneself as a ‘pro-people’ movement, will be enough to prove the point. The ‘pro’ dimension, as well as the proof of the universalistic change, really have to be constantly provided and reassessed. In any case, this proof will never be exempt from an inscription in knowledge/power.

*Politics as institutions and social processes: the economy and location of communication*

The messages by the intellectual and the debates around them come on the stage as an ensemble of activities, more like constellations of varying, and often seemingly distant, social processes, and cannot be explained through the sole Narmada people. Messages encompass other dimensions and protagonists, and communication translates the problems. This is in that sense that we will examine communication processes, in terms of successively changing economic, symbolic and technological fields. In particular, we argue that the key modification that communication operates in the Narmada case, is about the location of the struggle. In that respect, the fight for Narmada has three ‘places’, the play has three stages: ‘the Valley’, ‘Delhi’, ‘the Global contestation’. And, it is not sure that, at these three places, the fights revolve around the same problem. We will indeed try to show that in turn, this change in location alters the nature of the problem itself.

#### Anti-dams, stage I: ‘the’ Valley as a starting point, off Delhi

The starting space of contestation - in both terms of geographical location and mediatic environment - is well recorded in Patel (1997), an activist of the Gujarati NGO, ARCH-Vahini. He insists that the initial coverage by press and written media and the consequent first legal successes has been really instrumental in providing the initial impulsion to make tribals conscious that something can happen out of their action. While at the beginning of the 1980s only registered landowners were deemed to be rehabilitated, a faux-pas of the Government of Gujarat, soon infirmed by the Gujarat High Court, led the tribals to see that courts might support their claims. From 1984, their claims started involving rehabilitation for all. All over this period, is a slow but progressively increasing awareness campaign and recognition that a problem exists, mostly through isolated journalist ‘friends’ in metropolitan cities of India. Singh (1997) details that, in the 1980s, work of several NGOs had started in the valley through information campaigns and local public meetings, and he situates the 1989 Harsud (Madhya Pradesh) demonstration as the turning point of the NBA strategy. By that time, according to Singh, and ten years after the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal verdict of 1979<sup>32</sup>, Harsud had demonstrated that the “NBA received widespread support from environmental and social movements in India and abroad”. This had become high time for the struggle to go beyond the Valley, and to capitalise on the “NBA’s broad-based support, in the valley as well as among intellectuals

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<sup>31</sup> Along with another NGO, RSSS, they had started their work right from the early 1980s.

<sup>32</sup> Explicitly providing for re-allotment of agricultural land for oustees, never followed in acts.

and activists nation-wide". Singh actually describes well how 'Delhi' (understand: the political parties system) had initially failed to become a really structured place of the Narmada fight in the summer of 1990. Counter-marches, counter sittings in Delhi by Gujarati organizations and politicians had soon left the political parties unanimously support the dam, cutting across otherwise usual divisions.

#### Anti-dams, stage II: Delhi through global communication

By mid-1988 only some activists "and the people" (*sic*, Parasuraman, 1997) realised that the Government had no clear idea about relocation. A new series of rallies was conducted and opposition to the dam got being evolved as a strategy. For the first time within the activist movement, the environmental and larger economic considerations came to the fore. The divorce with ARCH-Vahini was consumed, and soon the State Governments would set up a line for refusing any negotiation with anti-dam movements. Common attempt to work at a collective solution had failed. The NBA developed a decidedly non-cooperative movement. As a result, in early 1992, all the 33 villages concerned by the submergence zone of the Sardar Sarovar were no longer accessible to Government officers or project developers. Equally, in Madhya Pradesh, there were 34 non-accessible villages, 99 with difficulties to access, for only 60 without resistance (source: NCA, 1992).

The double-level communication of the NBA (global positioning as seen from its website, but also urban rallies in India) has been made possible through, and maybe only through, a well orchestrated lobbying on multi-lateral government agencies and an objective alliance with 'global' NGOs (that is, western NGOs adopting global communication processes as well as a political stand that they project as of global relevance). This is this *détour* which has allowed the NBA shifting the attention *from* the *location* of the Valley to a national and global scene, for instance with the march organised in July 2000 in the Nimad region in Madhya Pradesh. The latter saw a four hundred personalities, *joined* by a 10,000 displaced people, as the press recalls. As one can see, out of the journey from Valley to Delhi, the primacy had again been reversed in press records, in spite of the logic of numbers: the four hundred were joined by a 10,000, and not the reverse as one would have actually expected.

It seems, in the 'anti' story, the resident educated urbanites deserve priority in mentioning compared to the huge number of those who made a long journey. In the anti-dam story, the Valley is indeed a first step only, which was soon to lead to another strategic choice on the ways to expand it: Delhi (the legal politics) vs. the world and its global influential politics. At the turn of 1990, the latter option had won, with its accrued role for communication as a protagonist in truth-making.

#### Anti-dams, stage III: The international and the role of the Environment Defence Fund (EDF)

How did the international connection start and develop? Patel (1997) mentions that, in 1984, John Clark (from Oxfam-UK) "mounted an intensive campaign in close collaboration with ARCH-Vahini. He enlisted the support of many international NGOs which became aware for the first time of the problem of displacement of tribals in the Narmada Valley. The issue became a 'cause célèbre' in the World Bank, as John Clark put it". This has practically led the World Bank imposing to the Government of Gujarat to revise and upgrade the Resettlement and Rehabilitation scheme that were planned for oustees from the project. One shall definitely wonder at the instrumentality of a Western NGO putting this case at the very time when the World Bank was starting considering its own policy in the matter, finally taking stock of over a 15 year, worldwide, series of critiques against its dam projects. Narmada was so to speak the emerged part of a large iceberg of accumulated, constructed knowledge, collectively constructed by activist networks in the whole world. The World Bank also entered in the business of renegotiating resettlement schemes, and communicated around it as a way to modify its dam policy while safeguarding its essential features. This was to lead to a new policy granted by the Government of Gujarat by December 1988.

How did this divergence arise? We have one account of it, according to Patel (1997), an ARCH-Vahini activist, in June 1988 "the Environment Defence Fund, a US-based environmental organization which had until then lobbied for the World Bank in concert with Oxfam-UK and supported the resettlement and rehabilitation demands of the tribals, suddenly changed course". It seems that here the chronicle matters, since Patel mentions that "the Maharashtra and MP organizations had still not declared their opposition to the project" and that "when they did so in August 1988, their opposition was as sudden as it was total. They

declared that the project was environmentally disastrous and economically ruinous". For Patel, these "rumblings against the project" had come from "metropolises of Bombay, Delhi, etc". What is lacking is the NBA version of the facts, when the 'anti-dam' mythical story actually starts around this troubled period.

#### Anti-dams, stage III today: "Medha speaks in DC", the self-justification of the EDF

The international campaign will go on around an alliance between the NBA and the EDF. In 1991, the NBA, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte are the co-winners of the "right livelihood award", in 1992, Medha wins the Goldman Environmental Prize. In 1989, the EDF takes her to the US to give a talk before the House of Representatives, qualifying the project as a "planned ecological disaster" (Patkar, 1989). The World Bank ultimately cancels its support to the project in 1993. In 1994, 1999, she travels again to the US. By that time, the fight had become largely 'symbolized' and NBA has adopted lines of presentation in tune with global debates. The website of the right livelihood ([www.rightlivelihood.sc](http://www.rightlivelihood.sc)) mentions that the NBA "has succeeded in generating a debate across the sub-continent which has encapsulated the conflict between two opposite styles of development: one massively destructive of people and the environment in the quest for large-scale industrialization; the other consisting of replicable small-scale activities harmoniously integrated with both local communities and nature".

This vision is largely simplified, romantic, and deafeningly silent about... the tribals! However, references tell a lot: this new debate supposedly generated by the NBA is actually the old Socialist Gandhian vision, sometimes accidentally articulated to the naïve essentialised perception of nature (in that latter case eschewing the possibility of its social construction and its acception as such<sup>33</sup>), and the whole range of progressive fights at the same time. These debates are historically and sociologically situated, in a marginal progressive India, in a today diminishing part of the urban 'elite'. Politically situated, such a presentation completely eludes the question of the possibility itself of such movements given the characteristics of the Indian State. It moreover no more presents the specificity of the NBA with regard to other movements. It ultimately glorifies an unspecified 'local', despite using the global means of the international awards. Beyond processes, one can wonder if unlimited association with orientalist western NGOs does not loosen the credibility of NBA's proposed alternative: "an energy and water strategy based on improving dry farming technology, watershed development, small dams, lift schemes for irrigation and drinking water, and improved efficiency and utilisation of existing dams" ([www.rightlivelihood.sc](http://www.rightlivelihood.sc)). But the fight has definitely gone beyond, when Medha advocates (as the unsaid and unrefereed part of a very intricate and subtle network of Indian debate around this issue) for the need to "redefine 'modernity'"... This goes much beyond the tribals.

Still, how can we characterise this statement in its historicity, and unearth its discursive archaeology? A very echoing critique of development and of the Indian State has been raised by Kothari (1984), who poses that "the linkage between (progress) and 'poverty' has become so organic and almost irreversible" (p.219). He actually advocates for the fact that « the 'grassroots' movements and non-party formations (...) have to be seen as part of the democratic struggle at various levels, in a radically different social context than was posited both by the incrementalists and by the revolutionaries, at a point of history when existing institutions and the theoretical models on which they are based have run their course, (...) and when large vacuums in political space are emerging thanks to the decline in the role of the State and the virtual collapse of 'government' in large parts of rural India" (p.219). But he does not militate so much for a simple critique as for a very refoundation of politics, as a concept and a practice. "It is an attempt at redefinition of politics in another sense too, namely redefinition of the contents of politics. Issues and arenas of human activity that were not so far seen as amenable of political action – people's health, rights over forests and community resources, even deeply personal and primordial issues are involved in the struggle for women's rights- get defined as political and provide arenas of struggle" (p 219-220). In political philosophy's terms, the focus of the autonomy is expanding; the differentiated change rebels against the material strength of the parties, seen as historically dated and a call for their *dépassement* is made.

How does this argument for a new system of truth percolate? Kothari himself recognises that, on these "new roles", "not everyone involved in popular movements sees it in this particular manner. Many of them are too

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<sup>33</sup> For a detailed panorama on the political philosophy of nature, see Giri (2003).

preoccupied with immediate struggles to be able to think in wider terms". But talking about others, and directly setting the direction to seek, he notes that some activists "are providing new linkages with segments of people's lives that had hitherto remained isolated and specialised", and some "are also seeking to link experiments at micro and regional levels to the macro political situation, partly by similar struggles at so many micro points and partly by the sheer impact of the example and will on wider public opinion" (p.220). The NBA of the 1980s looked to be in tune with this hope of a renewal. What is however interesting is to note the progression of the idea. If the concept of non-party politics has not, far from it, submerged the classical system, it has thoroughly evolved and sought for allies outside India. If Kothari sees well the historicity of this new avatar of politics, by stating that "the rationale and historical specificity of the non-party (groups) is of course clear", we can in effect note that he refers to struggles within Indian only: Assam, Jharkand, tribal North-East, and Andhra Pradesh, among others. Few years after, the extension of the fight has taken place on new rights and even more radically beyond India. By doing so it also has been immersed within a larger system of truth making. When Patkar (1989) mentions about the project, rehabilitation issues are no longer discussed, and environmental aspects of the project come first. For environmental is everything but objective and given in itself, one has to wonder which agenda is pursued in such matters. Das (1992), analysing the functioning of EDF with respect to the internationalisation of the Narmada campaign, details how involving 'local' or 'third world' activists has "contributed towards the consolidation of the notion among US environmental groups involved in the MDB<sup>34</sup> movement that (and, from here, Das quotes the EDF<sup>35</sup>) third world organizations are sharing common goals with the US groups". Ultimately, the movement such as perceived in the Western World has gradually taken the shape of an ecologist movement, mostly for intra-US communicative reasons. However, these interventions are at the very source of the cancellation of the World Bank support. This is then striking to see that the major 'external' development in the Narmada case has ultimately derived from what resembles an exercise of self-justification within the arena of US based NGOs.

*Global struggles as a new heteronomy*

Conversely, the NBA has been ready (or instrumental) to embrace all sorts of mottos and have its own relays. In 2000, 'Narmada Solidarity Coalition of New York' protests and demonstrates against the Supreme Court of India. By 1999, when Patkar gives a talk at Asha for education, the event is co-sponsored by no less than Amnesty International, ASM Diversity Committee, Campus Womens' Center, Center for South Asia, East Timor Action Network, Indian Graduate Students Association, LCA Free Thinkers, Madison Treaty Rights Support Group, NOW-Madison Chapter, Student Action for Indian Volunteerism and Aid, UW-Alliance for Democracy, UW-Greens, WISPIRG, WORT 89.9 FM. Independentist movements, educationists, environmentalists, a radio and so on. NBA has its global victory: an image and communication channels that move the whole global world of activists. This success is just confirmed at the 2003 Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad (The Hindu, Friday, January 03, 2003). At that time, the Hindu details the need, according to Medha's statement, to "broad base the struggle to fight not just globalization but casteism and communalism". The archaeology of knowledge of such a sentence encompasses a whole century of colonial construction in India, post-independence debates and institutions, socialist thinking on imperialism and critique of neo-liberalism. Actually, this discourse is embedded into a whole series and history of fights in India and beyond India. It is relevant of a whole process of historical materialism and set of structures where, Raynaud (2002) specifies, lies the conditions of the transformation, the condition of the politics. These conditions spell the very heteronomy of politics (Balibar, 1997). There is no longer a simple fight against a dam, nor a fight conveying a particular process of transforming the society with an associated vision of it. There is on top of that, a materialistic result of a history of struggles, which encompass the dam. It articulates in a precise combination of elements: (i) a Gandhian Socialist identity, (ii) a globalised mode of communication, and (iii) an anti liberal-globalisation symbolism. The dam that allows and crystallises politics is ultimately drowned in the historical and material heteronomy of the latter. Isolated from its context; the above mentioned Medha's statement is a pure formal, symbolic, conceptual, communicative stanza. What makes it understandable and operative finds its roots far beyond the dam. Medha has gone from the Valley to *the* global.

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<sup>34</sup> Movement for monitoring Multilateral Development Banks.

<sup>35</sup> See EDF (1989).

And indeed, we have mentioned that the fight for Narmada has three ‘places’: ‘the Valley’, ‘Delhi’, ‘the Global contestation’, out of which the former and the latter are more of a mythical order. Indeed, the former faces difficulties in taking-off, as we will analyse now, while the latter takes place in a completely altered mode compared to the Valley reality. And indeed two tensions arise, respectively symbolized by the evolution over twenty years of the *focus* and *kind* of intellectual involved. The focuses have grown and multiplied, most likely because the economy of knowledge has more and more revolved around mechanisms of truth making through foundations, public philanthropy, doctoral studies, ‘independent’ studies and awards. The EDF example is telling, and the multiplicity of channels has led to the multiplicity of truths around Narmada, at least to a multiplicity of levels of truth. Second, the type of the intellectual at play has evolved over three periods. While the first non-party intervention was already a politico-intellectual one (the Kalpavriksh report in 1983), the present ‘urban intellectual’ commitment is both of a higher magnitude, and of a much higher institutionalization, when ‘DC’ and ‘NY’ are taken to the fore. Similarly, the backgrounds have diversified, rights fighters and social workers to policy makers, academics, information people, film makers... And, concerning the remains of the second phase which had seen the local involvement of the tribals, its reality today has to be re-assessed.

All together, the third place of the Narmada, the ‘Global contestation’, is highly symbolic therefore highly ‘effective’; but nevertheless its ‘efficiency’ with respect to a non-symbolic local problem is questionable. There is undoubtedly a political success here, which no *party* could have realised. Indeed, the national Indian political scene that Kothari (1984) evaluates through the emergence of *non-party* movements, illustrates negatively what Gramsci, in his *notes on Machiavel* details as the evolution of the police function of the party. This function may as well be progressive, when it limits the reactionary forces, or regressive when it constrains the “acting forces of history”<sup>36</sup> and “exerts an out-dated legality”<sup>37</sup>. In that respect, the problem is, that the universalistic function of the alienated can be objectively assessed at only two conditions: that the party recognizes the definition and practice of politics as given by political philosophy, but and importantly enough, that the alienated class allows itself to ‘make’ its own organic intellectuals (or that any other class allows the alienated class to do so). And in that case, the processes at stake today in India do not give any legitimacy in this field to the political parties. However, the success of the NGOs has been limited in terms of location of the fight. And indeed, the intellectual a la Foucault is not directly in an immediate relation to the world of production, though Foucault however gives the clue for his indirect and subtle articulation within the production process: the critique of the truth makers (people and institutions). In this problem is the core of the evaluation of the Narmada action: where is the intellectual challenging through communicative means the public, State, truth-makers? We will see that this is, in many respects, the figure of the global (urban) intellectual, armed with very specific communication means. This will in turn lead to the following question: can the global intellectual relate to the local Narmada’s alienated class, and how?

### III. The Narmada without an organic intellectual?

The task to relate to the people, for the urban intellectual, is actually uneasy in the valley. Parasuraman (1997) mentions that concerned tribals in “inaccessible villages” do not generally go beyond the third standard in elementary school (and even so, quite exceptionally) while no adults can usually read. However, some unexpected results had initially generated hope.

*ARCH-Vahini, or the wish to be more than ‘representative’: reactive to the tribals*

Parasuraman (1997) recalls the origin of the movement and states that “people had little or no information about the project”; “it was only after the activists arrived in the valley that some consciousness was generated”<sup>38</sup>. Something rarely mentioned in the Western media, especially after the opposition strategy had been adopted by the ‘antis’, the resettlement policies concern only those few who had land records in hand. This not only questions the fate of landless people, but also the future of those numerous tribals de facto cultivating public forest land whom the State (initially the colonial, but this was maintained after

<sup>36</sup> In Tosel’s French translation, “les forces vives de l’histoire”.

<sup>37</sup> In Tosel’s French translation, “maintient une légalité dépassée”.

<sup>38</sup> Based out of the 1987 reports of the Multiple Action Research Group, New Delhi.

independence) considers as encroachers<sup>39</sup>. In that context, some undeniable success had been reached by both NBA and ARCH-Vahini. Indeed, Singh (1997) mentions that, at Harsud, “The NBA had succeeded in uniting the oustees throughout the valley (from poor tribals to rich farmers and traders), overcoming the entrenched prejudices and divisions that had so far governed the polity and economy of the region”.

Parasuraman (1997) adds that, in Gujarat, “Young men and women were in the forefront of the emerging movement to demand better compensation. A new set of young leaders emerged under the initiative of the activists. They composed songs on health care, education, self-sufficiency, self-respect, tribal independence, and assertiveness”. “By 1987, about two years after the activists had entered the villages, people started questioning the officials and persuaded them to come to their villages to talk about the project and Resettlement and Rehabilitation issues”. “The village committees prepared (for the Government) comprehensive household data on land possessed, location, and extent of submergence”. Actually, this is quite interesting to see that, what at that time was an information and rehabilitation movement, and not yet an anti-dam movement, had first of all developed a popular basis, and did convey some universalistic approach. Indeed, Parasuraman (1997) details that, among other demands, “extension of rehabilitation and resettlement benefits to those affected by colony, canal, sanctuary, and compensatory afforestation programmes” were raised. This undoubtedly constitutes a practical success, detailed by Baviskar (1995), but not followed with a second step neither in acts by the State nor as a consequence by the evolution of the movement.

Patel (1997), an activist from ARCH-Vahini, describes a process of learning-by-doing for the activists themselves, stating that they knew nothing about administrative practices, rules, laws, Forest Acts and so on, by the beginning of their fight. Though from an urban origin, they have developed a Narmada-specific political action. They therefore gained the legitimacy of not only putting to the fore the issues, but of doing so from within, and from knowledge gained around and articulated with their political demand. Patel details that, from 1986 onwards, tribals from Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra evolved the same claims of resettlement for all, with demands “made village-wise and collectively”. Patel recalls the whole details of that fight but, what we find interesting in our questioning, is that for this major step Patel credits the tribals themselves and not his own organisation. And from there we get just another narrative compared to what the ‘antis’ give. Indeed, he recalls that the whole process of credible rehabilitation for all was deemed to be stuck due to lack of available land in 1985, the tribals responded “in a most unusual way” by giving the activists “a list of landowners in the command area who were ready to sell about seven thousand acres of land”. And, Patel comments, “Once again, the tribals had taken the initiative at a critical juncture”. Of course, this may not prove much on their actual action compared to NBA except the fact that they choose to communicate and to make their truth revolve around the tribal rather than on the principle of authority (intellectual, artists, noted activists, and so on).

From this juncture, one question arises: was it possible to go on in this way of creating a tribal consciousness and a tribal action as a collective? This may well be impossible to know, just because it is impossible to know what would be the ‘change in the change’ and, ultimately, the NBA/ARCH-Vahini’s clash revolves around respective conceptions of the world to be won. Are these articulated around ‘different tribals’? Are the Gujarati tribals ready to be relocated in Gujarat, while the Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra tribals (under the organisation called Narmada Dharangrast Samiti) would not be ready to go to Gujarat (cf. Intach, 1994). Patel indeed recalls that according to the Tribunal Award of 1979, tribals could either get relocated in Gujarat or in their own State if such was their choice. The Indian administration, and especially the Forest Department bears a high responsibility in leading Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra Governments to “push all the oustees to Gujarat”, Patel mentions. While ARCH-Vahini considers the Gujarat policy of December 1987 as “a revolutionary policy”, the NBA has declared in a paper policy. Still, the issue that remains is about what ‘the tribals’ really think of it, and of how they can either *be made* to think about it, or *by themselves* think about it. According to Patel, in the Gujarat new model, “the tribals’ central role has been to identify land, to have the prices of land fixed through the formally appointed Land Purchase Committee (LPC) of which (ARCH-Vahini is) a permanent member body, and to make sure that

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<sup>39</sup> Patel (1987) just suggests these issues. On the continuity between colonial and post-independence administrative practices against common property seen as ‘encroachment’, see the doctoral thesis of Emmanuel Bon (2000).

land parcels of two hectares are allotted to each family”. According to him, “the tribals have taken the initiative to form groups of their own to identify land, to press for the fixation of a just price, and to oversee the final allotment”.

These latter examples amply illustrate, we believe, the difference at stake between the intellectual involved in party politics, like Gadar, the revolutionary singer of People War Group naxalites<sup>40</sup> or again their Telugu poet, Sri Sri, aiming at a large long-reaching conscientisation, and the intellectual engaged in non-party politics, concerned with the present and looking for direct outcomes of action. Exemplary of the second category, beyond the Medha Patkar of the mid 1980s, is Niyogi, from Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, the liberation front, to which Kothari explicitly refers. This format of non-party involvement conveys the old Gramscian idea of the possibility to integrate not only the political society, but also the civil society in the function of direction, which is the only one legitimate, where the function of domination alone is not, had been short-lived in the Narmada case, but not fully un-lived. For politics as autonomy can never practically be measured or even assessed, three practical questions will remain: was there (is there still) any specific way for the organic intellectual to emerge in the Narmada? How universal, in the Marxian sense, has remained the fight of the ‘antis’? And how is this connected to the present evolution of the Indian democracy? For this set of three questions relates to worlds, we will just underline some analytical elements.

#### *‘Devenir-minorité’ and the form of the Narmada intellectual*

Any political fight necessarily links with the identity of its protagonists and the possibility for them to figure themselves out *in* politics, including considering themselves as being part of an ‘activated’ minority. This is what that Deleuze and Guattari (quoted by Balibar), call a ‘devenir-minorité’, that is becoming one with/from the alienated minority. This ultimately refers to what Balibar names the heteronomy of the heteronomy of the politics, or the conditions in the sense of the “fashion in which they are carried by the subjects or carry them<sup>41</sup>”. That implies an evolutive process, on the part of the group perceiving its own potentiality of becoming the historically acting minority. In our case, the perception by the tribals that the Court may be made instrumental in their fight had been a key step in them acknowledging their ‘devenir-minorité’.

In terms of instrumentality, what can be, if any, the modes of creation of the tribal organic intellectual? In the Narmada case, no intellectual in the ‘superior’ strata could straightforwardly emerge from among the tribals. Still, thanks to the necessary intervention of the urban intellectuals, the (though minoritarian) intellectual part of the tribal activity has increased: the vision changes, and meetings structure the shift towards a higher share of the intellectuality in the day-to-day life. Indeed, according to some testimonies<sup>42</sup>, the tribals concerned with the NBA movement start raising questions and critical statement. They include, at different levels, and with varying degrees, questions pertaining to the fact that Medha Patkar has not favoured the emergence of tribal spoke-persons, that the decisions concerning the movement have been top down, radical and refusing negotiations, especially at a time when tribals perceive a relative defeat of their struggle. Besides, more or less nourished rumours about the possibility for the movement to go and join party politics have sown doubts in the minds of tribals having long been taught to be defiant towards party politics. Equally, misunderstandings have developed out of blurred alliance policies, ranging from objective support by nationalist sympathies up to ultra leftist groups, contributing even more in confusion. In some extreme cases, observers declare, some wonderings about the leadership qualities of a leader proposing being drowned as a last recourse policy have emerged, considering these extreme measures rather as a sign of weakness and failure. These elements show that, out of the objective, material conditions of the struggle, and whatever can be won on that side, the gradual construction of a struggle is even more grounded on social links and representations.

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<sup>40</sup> The CPI(ML)PW stands for the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) People’s War.

<sup>41</sup> In French : « au sens de la manière dont elles sont portées par les sujets ou les portent »

<sup>42</sup> This refers to personal communication with rural animators representative of action groups active in rural Maharashtra and in contact with tribal activists of the NBA as well as other tribal communities in the submergence zones.

In other words, and in the case of the Narmada, the economico-corporatist only represents the categorial economic stakes (as an heteronomy of politics), while the ethico-politic has to be, we believe, the functioning of the Indian democracy. This reconciliation only will allow restoring the ethic aspect of the autonomy of politics: the figure of the emancipation, the practical aspect of it residing in the subtle inter-meshing of the processes of communication.

### *Democracy endangered*

Irrespective of the fact that the NBA position on the global stage does not directly relate to the tribals, it has however polarised the political scene in a way loaded with many risks. As Dalal (2002) mentions, “the NBA’s failure has serious implications for the future of protests in the country”, and wonders how it did “alienate the people of Gujarat”, and how “a set of notoriously corrupt (Gujarati) politicians carry more weight (in the regard of the people than) the poor tribal of Madhya Pradesh, whose land is being submerged”? This NGOs’ collective failure in creating a united front to co-evolve with the developmental State its policy; failure to therefore progress towards a conciliation; failure to evolve within a secularist environment: religion: Narayanan’s support was partly substantiated by the fact that, recalling Gandhi’s words, “Land belongs to Ram”<sup>43</sup>. The problematic discrepancy, between this statement and the very fact that tribals are not Hindus, has largely passed unnoticed in the Indian press. Actually, the religious mode is rather the credo of the pro-dam wing. For instance, the so-called Swami (shri) Narayan Sanstha, or before him Yogiji Lord (sic) Harikrishna Maharaj, had been made use of their presence and prayers at the project site, with extensive propaganda and mobilisation<sup>44</sup> by the Government of Gujarat. At the time of India’s Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit to America, these religious organisations had for instance managed to organise a counter-petition, gathering a 52,000 signatures.

If the NBA fight has an ambitious spectrum, is it for such a universalistic claim articulated to an alienated class? Nothing is sure such as this. When Medha Patkar has claims in re-assessing modernity, she is much more connected to other intellectual figures in India than to the tribal. Not that this is not historically relevant for the tribal, but that the NBA has not succeeded in creating and actualising this connection and this relevance (the evolution in the evolution) where politics resides. On the contrary, Intach (1994) reproduces an open letter from a tribal to the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister. The letter is a long, non-romanticised, account of the diversity of the agricultural production, of the stability it provides in times of low market prices, on the amount of money it can also procure. It recalls a documented list of all goods and services, including immaterial, that the tribal way of life procures once articulated to an external market, but in a way independent from it. Thus, it details a mostly utilitarian vision, therefore modern, vision of the world and social claim, out of which a universalistic political consciousness might well take-off. The way the fight is stylised matters: whether it is around ‘stop the dam’, ‘ensure a real rehabilitation’, ‘ensure availability and transparency of information’ is not neutral.

In that context, the whole issue of the symbolic dimension of the Narmada lays in integrating this claim as well. In Baba Amte’s words “Narmada will linger on the lips of the nation as a symbol of all struggles against social injustice”. However, if this symbol is deemed to be used in Socialist Gandhian or naïve global NGOs contexts only, in dis-connection to the Narmada as a location and the Narmada people as a collective, then the local has lost its flavour, its identity, its meaning. Just another denial.

### **Conclusion: Substantive aspects of Knowledge and the heteronomy of Narmada politics**

The substantive aspects of the Knowledge articulated around the Narmada, its varying forms, its producers and dynamics, matter in shaping or not a political identity of the tribals. Balibar, ultimately, mentions about the concept of ‘civility’, which consists in giving space (private or public) to the politics; can the sole participation of outside intellectuals create politics in the sense of Balibar? At different levels, the analysis shows a contrasted picture. At the global level, of course, the continuum between Indian (urban) and ‘Western’ intellectuals seems to prove the vitality of a global politics: the perception of the universal is

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<sup>43</sup> The Hindu, Monday, December 11, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. [www.swaminarayan.org](http://www.swaminarayan.org), among others.

trans-bounder. However, the relative inability to bring up rural organic intellectuals raises the question of the actuality of politics understood as the universal struggle *for* but also *by* the alienated class.

A practical problem will always reside where the theory names the differentiated change: do the evolving perceptions already reveal such a change, and, therefore, a success? All depends on what is the teleological criteria adopted, and where the benchmark is put. In particular, since social struggles develop on experience accumulated over years, some amount of success can still be seen despite the direct goals are not attained. Conversely, a more pessimistic vision would analyse the same context quite differently. This question might actually be clinched by the political context in today's India: if, for progressive circles in the country the urge of the day is to fight against radicalisation and communalisation of politics, then the short run experience might not give enough time to enjoy nor appreciate the long run progress provided by too minor successes.

Even worse, given the long back casteist and class background of India, this is not even sure that the very perception, by the concerned class itself, of what its (the universal) 'rights' are, is not constrained too much by the social conditions. As a limit, the definition itself of the intellectual matters, but, we argue, the philosophy of the praxis, in the sense it relates to *processes*, can provide a measure of the degree of progressiveness in the so-called Indian democracy. In that latter respect, different testimonies prove that, in some circumstances, tribals are willing to speak and act. If we believe that the Indian democracy is more directly endangered than the global environment, or if we only believe that the global NGOs will not necessarily address the former while they would anyway focus on the latter, supported or not by the 'Global South NGOs', then there is an urgency to shift back to the figure of the tribal, and look for inspiration from the several tribal movements in the past.

Anyway, and as it stays today, the Narmada fight, over twenty years and more, has seen a mind-boggling diversity of people to comment, a diversity of media. Groups have emerged, some have disappeared. The role of urban support groups in India has changed, up to becoming paradoxically marginalised today with respect to the battalions deployed by the US economy of knowledge. If at any point of time, Hoshangabad, Bhopal, Rajasthan, Delhi, Bombay and other places have mattered, to further engender 'the' NBA, the Narmada has now become a hub with much longer spokes for politics, for scholars, for social movements of all kinds. It has become a metaphor of changes of political activism in India and beyond. It may have, in the process of emerging as a mediatic figure, paradoxically lost its original clarity and substance.

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