Grassroots and Nonprofit Capacity to Mobilize Opposition against Nation-State Policy: Opposition to the Narmada Valley Development Project

By Dennis Marotta

Abstract

India’s Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP) is a massive undertaking, which consists of a network of over 3,000 dams along the Narmada River and its tributaries and an extensive canal system for irrigation. The two largest dams in the project, the Sardar Sarovar and the Narmada Sagar, have raised worldwide controversy concerning their social and ecological implications. Concerned grassroots and nonprofit organizations have mobilized opposition against the project aimed at amending these programmatic deficiencies, or abolishing the project entirely. This essay explores how the resistance movement strategized against and impacted the NVDP. It also asks how they could have been more effective and what lessons are to be learned from their experiences.

The resistance movement understood that before it could meaningfully impact the project it would have to raise a critical public outcry, which pressured the Indian government and supporting institutions, such as the World Bank, to reform the dam project. Accordingly, they employed a variety of tactics and targeted the major international supporting institutions. The activists’ efforts resulted in Japan’s financial withdrawal from the project, the World Bank exerting pressure on project designers to reassess the project, and the Bank, ultimately, pulling out of the project itself.

The one flaw that compromised the effectiveness of the struggle was a division between the organizations against the dam project and the local peoples directly
affected. Differing objectives actually made these two groups counterproductive to one another. A united and open movement will foster a healthy atmosphere increasing the probability of the desired outcomes.