# Dam(n)med Bodies: Disorderly Subjectivity and Sublime Experience in the Narmada Movement

# Abstract

This paper explores moments of plural and democratising disorderliness that interrupt and contest a vision of the sublime as a particular ordering of subjectivity. Situated within the context of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA) movement against the construction of the *Sardar Sarovar* dam in India in the mid-1990s, it argues gestures toward sublime regimes and ‘counter-sublime’ insurgences draw their energies from the figure of the dam and the *bund*, respectively. Where the dam’s walls establish the horizons of visibility, instituting imaginaries of subject/object, human/nature, the *bund*’s curved surfaces reveal a pluralising depth that folds the visible with/in the invisible, collapsing differences, and constituting the possibility of novel modes of seeing/subjectification.

Working through oral histories, films, images, archival materials, and ethnographic studies alongside the work of Foucault and the later Merleau-Ponty, the paper argues, the Narmada movement enacts a ‘counter-sublime’ in terms of an interruption that discloses the possibilities of alternative modes of seeing, contesting the invisibility imposed by the dam. The cultivation of a particular style of being, and its interrelated modes of visuality that open affirmingly towards a depth characterised by the collapse of dichotomies of subject/object, and thus of a regime of visibility/subjectivity. An imbrication of the human subject into the natural world, disclosing – by way of a novel ‘seeing’ – the complex ecosocial conditions of all life. In this way putting under erasure the dam’s sublime order of in/visibility; revealing its contingent character and uncovering the possibilities of radically different constellations of visibility; of subjectification.

**Keywords:** radical democracy; aesthetics; the Sublime; Narmada; Merleau-Ponty; Kant

# Introduction

Damming the Narmada River has been a central focus of the Indian state and its policymakers since at least the 1960s. In a country of crippling poverty, and overwhelmingly dependent on an agricultural cycle itself reliant on the annual monsoon, the benefits of large dams appeared a panacea. The Narmada Valley Development Project, a vast and ambitious infrastructure program envisioned damming the entire Narmada watershed, a region spanning most of central India (Brieger and Sauer 2000; Kothari and Bhartari 1984). The crown of this grand concrete body constricting the Narmada is the Sardar Sarovar dam – 200 metres high and stretched across the river just as it emerges onto the wide coastal plains of southern Gujarat. A great concrete behemoth marking one final moment of capture and control, as a rapidly industrialising, modern nation-state asserts its mastery.

Yet, concealed behind the dam’s walls is an altogether different story that opposes itself to, and rends itself apart from, the orderly visions of the Indian State. Over a million people – most from *Adivasi*[[1]](#endnote-1) communities that live along the banks of the river – have been displaced and hundreds of thousands of hectares of ancient teak forests have been submerged. The widespread loss of insect, plant, and animal life because of submergence continues to frustrate attempts at systematic quantification. Thousands of sites of communal significance, sacred groves, and community forests were cleared and drowned with almost no planning, community participation or impact assessment (Baviskar, 1995). Nonetheless, the State continues to insist on the dam’s communal benefits drawing an equivalence with traditional, community-based mechanisms of watershed management. *Bunds* – small, stone and mud structures that slow or temporarily hold up the flow of water through a small stream – are a common presence in the arid mountainous regions through which the Narmada flows. The *bund* does for a particular village what the dam is ostensibly supposed to do for entire provinces. The State imaginary of the dam embraces this continuity. Between the dam and the *bund*: rational planning and a practice of the ages. The Sardar Sarovar is only a large *bund*; not one village, but a hundred villages will benefit in the same way as they always have from their *bunds*. Dam-building is only a centralisation – even, a rationalisation – of practices that are always-already underway.

Through the discussion here, I aim to show how this claimed continuity rests on a fundamental rupture, the steel and concrete of the dam, the stones and soil of the *bund*. And, to feel the contours of this rupture demands a turn to our phenomenological encounter with these objects. The shifts, that is, from an encounter with the dam standing on specially-designed viewing galleries, to the warmth and excitement of village meetings that run late into the night behind the dam walls.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is in the crevices of such discontinuities, I argue, that the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Movement) enacts its resistance through a practice of democratic reimagination.

From the viewing gallery, the dam presents itself as a sublime object that institutes a particular regime of visibility – of who can speak and be heard. Yet, in shifting where we stand (moving from standing, to marching, to walking, to dancing), in traversing the border marked by the dam’s opaque walls, what is problematised is precisely this sublime differentiation of the in/visible, of orderly and unruly bodies. At its broadest, this is the claim I wish to substantiate in the present discussion. Across its four sections, this paper charts some of these movements. From standing against/opposed to the dam, looking up, to walking with/in the *bund*; from a disembodied separation from ‘nature’ – as the condition of all life – to a situated and corporeal/carnal intertwining with it. In and through these translocations, ones undertaken by the Narmada Movement, the question this paper poses is: in what ways is a vision of sublime order disordered? What forms of visibility does the dam as sublime enable, police, or inhibit? And what fugitive in/visibilities, democratising and pluralising, are performed and enacted by the Narmada Movement and its unruly aesthetic-political operation? What is, to put it in a way echoing Foucault, the Narmada Movement’s counter-sublime?

By the counter-sublime I seek to mark a practice of problematisation of sublime experience and its orders of visibility. Not simply an inversion of sublime experience – from Kantian transcendence to Herderian immanent naturalism, for instance – but a more fundamental disordering of its presuppositions. In this sense, it is a counter-*sublime* insofar as it opens up to experience an order of the in/visible, of the schematisation and stylisation of bodies, and it is a *counter­*-sublime to the extent that it resists any such order of the sublime subject, uncovering within it an unruly insurgence that makes indistinct any extrication of the body from its intertwined (in/visible) being in and of the (its) world. A counter-sublime operation the way I discuss it in what follows, then, is a constitutively doubled operation. On the one hand, problematising a whole order of the sublime (and its subject), and et, on the other, doing so by a phenomenological reconfiguration of such experience. To problematise a vision of the subject internal to the sublime alongside and by way of an orthogonal reorientation of its experience – a shift, as we will soon see, from elevation to enlivenment. The sublime entails a particular stylisation or schematisation of bodies, and insofar as the possibilities of sublime experience are conditioned by this ordering (which it at once also institutes), we can see the Narmada Movement’s counter-sublime operation as the disruption of any such order; a different way, or style of being, that radically reimagines ‘sublime experience’ in a pluralising and democratising direction.

# Stand: The Sublime Experience of the Dam

The dam is an imposing structure, with deep, straight lines plunging down from great heights. Perfectly measured and ordered so that the result is a great symmetric totality. Within it, millions of tiny elements – steel bars, concrete blocks, iron rivets – are fused together; nothing is independently discernible. Grey, concrete walls concealing all difference(s). Thousands of rectangular concrete blocks transformed into smooth, curved slopes. No cracks, no interstices –only the vertical lines of channels and flutes organising the flow of the river. Metal sluice gates command the river to flow down certain lines and not others. From time to time, one of these gates opens, and an immense column of water bursts forth, shooting down the concrete walls and crashing into the riverbed below. The whole spectacle is orchestrated to inspire awe and fear. Standing on the viewing gallery, we are overwhelmed by the unfathomable magnitude of the dam as an ostensibly infinite entity, and frightened by the sheer force and power it unleashes as the gates open. A thoroughly ambivalent feeling takes hold of us – pleasure in the realisation of some vision of human mastery, but frustration at the incomprehensibility of what faces us on the viewing gallery. And, just as we feel pleasure and frustration at beholding the dam in its gargantuan dimension, one of the gates opens and an unstoppable torrent of water is unleashed. Angry, frothing columns shoot down the dam’s face and crash into the valley floor. Facing this terrifying spectacle, we sense our utter helplessness before a force that utterly overpowers us. And yet, we feel a sense of pleasure because we understand our position of safety (our position *above* the water crashing into the riverbed). Such ambivalence draws us to envision the dam as a sublime object.

A Kantian account is particularly illuminating. Sublime objects are those that threaten to overpower us or frustrate our capacities to grasp them sensually, the two modalities that Kant identifies as the dynamical and the mathematical sublime (Guyer 2012: 104). We can begin to see how our experience of the dam maps on this Kantian framework.[[3]](#endnote-3) On the one hand, the dam is quite simply baffling. It presents itself to us as an unbounded infinitude. Looking up at the dam walls as they rise from under our feet seemingly to a point where they merge with the sky, we feel a complete helplessness, a complete loss at the impossibility of grasping the dam in its fullness. The object is quite simply, sensually overwhelming, frustrating our capacities for apprehension. Yet precisely because we continue in our attempt to grasp this object of infinite magnitude, we awaken within us the realisation of a capacity that can transcend our sensual limitations and comprehend such infinitude. Sensual frustration is harmonised here, for Kant, with a capacity for ‘reason-in-general’; a suprasensible potential constitutive of sublime pleasure as that in which we realise our ‘subjective accord with *ideas* of reason (indeterminately indicated)’ (Kant 2009: 86).[[4]](#endnote-4)

On the other, the overpowering might of the dam is tamed from the viewing galleries, as we rationally judge ourselves to be safe (Guyer 1982: 771). The dam has been designed and built specifically to withstand these forces through the careful attention of thousands of engineers and the fabrication of novel materials that can hold back any amount of water. A judgement that derives from our remoteness to the objects that threaten us. Not simply spatially but in terms of a recognition of ourselves as independent of nature and rising above it (Kant 2009: 92). Such remoteness, for Kant, ‘gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.’ (Kant 2009: 91). A recognition of our ability to act rationally/morally in the face of fear and terror, to act in ways that attest to the mind’s “own vocation even over nature” (Kant 2009: 92).

Kant’s decisive move here, in either case, is the shift away from the object as a ground of experience. The object is of course central to aesthetic experience, but only insofar as it is an occasion for the judging subject to exercise its faculties. Kant sees pure subjective interiority as an inescapable and necessary condition of sublimity. As he points out,

‘true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this disposition by the judgement formed of it… the mind abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason placed, though quite apart from any definite end, in conjunction therewith…and it feels itself elevated in its own judgement of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas.’ (Kant 2009: 86-87)

Sensual frustration or being overwhelmed is a necessary condition or occasion for sublime pleasure, but the ground of such pleasure is entirely of the mind. Two intimately connected movements come together at this juncture. On the one hand, Kant’s turn institutes a disembodied account of sublime experience. Whether in terms of an abstract capacity for reason-in-general, or a faculty of rational judgement, Kant draws us away from situated and embodied modes of apperception. Sublime pleasure is in the domination of reason over sensibility, both as picking up the task to which sense is inadequate, and as revealing to sense the folly of its immediate perceptions. Kant’s account shifts away from the sensual encounter with the sublime object and elevates sublime experience into a transcendental-ideal realm always towering above the lower faculties. At the same time, the move being made here also disembeds and isolates sublime experience from its practical situation. In its remoteness from the object, sublime pleasure constitutes an extrication from the mediated encounter that is its occasion. A disembedding that places the rational subject outside in opposition to and elevated above the object.

The broader antagonistic tone of Kant’s formulation gains particular import here. The disembedded and disembodied subject of sublime experience establishes, in its separation from ‘vulgar commonplaces’ (Kant 2009: 91), a sovereignty over existence itself, a pure subjection of nature (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Kant drives home the point: ‘Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us).’ (Kant 2009: 94). Reason as that which is attested to in sublime pleasure enables a particular relation of domination and control between a subject that ‘confers meaning and the meaningless object…rational significance and its accidental bearer’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 7). Our sensual apprehension is only a calling point on what is essentially a journey of the mind. Sublime experience institutes the mastery of its subject over nature, as the bearer of reason and that self that is ‘no longer supposed to be either a body or blood or a soul, or even a natural ego, but [is] *sublimated* into a transcendental or logical subject, [forming] the reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 22, italics are mine).

The dam as architectural artefact resonates such disembodiment-disembedding. The grey concrete of the dam stands out from the green forests, red soil, and brown rocks. The dam’s grey is an imposition and domination. Standing apart from that which surrounds it, in an external (elevated) relation to the world. It asserts its difference, its exemplification of a reason that orders nature and is not part of it. Morose grey surfaces make clear that it does not belong to where it situates itself, its world. A line of division between that which surrounds it, and that which is internal to it – perhaps we can also say between that which is in front of it and that which is behind it – between the hydroelectric generators, viewing galleries, museums and visitor centres; and the deep reservoir and dense forests that attempt to survive at its fringes. In exemplifying this division between itself as rational, ordered, and smooth, and that which surrounds it as chaotic and uneven, the dam’s structure instantiates the dissonant tension between situated sensibility and transcendent reason.

The object is brought to its knees; its seeming overpowering size is subsumed into ‘the infinitude of an infinite subjectivity’ (Adorno 2018: 27). The dam as sublime is, in this sense, a frontier of in/visibility perpetually distinguishing, separating and delimiting the proper and improper, subject and object, orderly and unruly. An ordering of places, of proper and improper subjects, and their proper sites, of who can and cannot stand on the viewing galleries. Pillars marking submergence zones, barbed wire fences enclosing community forest lands, barricades to stop protestors from reaching the dam, police checkpoints and ultimately, brute submergence.

# March: The Dam and its Sublime Order(ing)

The spatial schema of the dam, however, is always-already a physiological regime.[[5]](#endnote-5) Its fences, barricades and borders are enacted on, and inscribed onto the body, enveloping, and binding it. It is the body, then – savage bodies and civilised bodies – that becomes this site of an ineradicable difference that constitutes sublime order. The *Adivasi* body, its particular modes of bodily formation and styles of being become the animalised life against which the dam institutes its colonial regime. My suggestion, building on decolonial and Black radical critiques of Kant, runs deeper than simply claiming that the anthropology instituted in Kant’s account of sublime experience lends itself to the kind of subjectivising task outlined here. The claim, instead, is that this differentiation is a condition of possibility of Kant’s sublime subject of reason. The latter figure can only form itself by opposing itself to that which Spivak calls the not-yet-subject, or the non-subject. For, it is against such an aesthetic non-subject that the capacities of reason and judgement constitutive of the aesthetic subject of the sublime are identified and differentiated (Chakravorty-Spivak 1999: 14). The racialised and colonial other is not a consequence of a prior difference that allows us to delimit the proper domain of the subject as-such; the two are co-constitutive (Armstrong 1996: 226).

Anthropological hierarchies grounding the imaginary of the sublime subject of reason that opposes itself – elevates itself – to nature and sense, establishing itself as the teleological end of the subject. A certain way of seeing that marks a horizon of the visible in terms of a distribution of bodies; their identification as human and non-human, subject and non-subject (Lloyd 2018: 50-51). Its stylisation in a particular form – rational, autonomous, sovereign, modern – a threshold that is instituted on an abyssal invisibility of *Adivasi* bodies. The sublime subject rests on its others, its savages, its non-subjects, in order to establish and ground its own claims to fullness (Gikandi 2001). And the condition of possibility for such hierarchisation is the elemental dissonance that for Kant is constitutive of sublime experience: between situated sensibility and transcendent reason. The recovery of one (or the elevation above one) by way of the other establishes/grounds a boundary of propriety. Between the proper subject of sublime experience and the sensual excess at its fringes, which is to say, between a subject capable of such elevation and the non (or, not-yet) subject too bound to its own sensuality and flesh. Kant’s account of sublime experience, as we have just seen, marks a gap or disjunct between a certain helplessness and reassurance. A disjunct he seeks to harmonise in and through a suprasensible elevation. But, before any such harmonisation, it is precisely this gap that we see as the ground for an anthropological differentiation – in which the sublime subject capable of suprasensibility first separates itself from its nonsubjective other.

Racial and colonial otherness presents to the sublime subject an abyssal point, a threshold that is both the limit of the human, and a particular disruption of that universal schema (Fanon 1986: 160). That point at which aesthetic subjectivity comes undone, where the subject encounters the limits of its own ‘infinitude’, the pure Otherness of the subject that is not yet subject. An affront to universality (and to reason) experienced in the sublime encounter – all these vulgar commonplaces that must be brought to heel, dominated, and controlled by the suprasensible elevation of reason. An abyssal point, that must be erased, made invisible, forgotten, or otherwise evicted for a universal regime of the subject to institute itself. The *Adivasi* subject, this ‘savage life [that] is just another form of animal life’ (Mbembe 2003: 24), must be eradicated and denied subjectivity as the condition of possibility of the formation of a sublime subject of the dam. The dam grounds a regime that enables particular modes of being, speaking, activity and sociality, while blocking, erasing or making invisible others (Muller 2020: 21-22). Its material systematicity and uniformity – straight lines, smooth surfaces, rigid verticality, unfathomable magnitude, impenetrable opacity – shape the disposition of its sublime subject, (re)forming life itself, a particular image of human life, by distributing capacities and potentialities of subjective being across a segmented spatial regime (Aslam 2020: 170). The dam is the border.

In this sense, the ambivalent experience encountered at the viewing gallery is one that is totally foreclosed to the Adivasi body. Situated within a spatial-physiological schema grounding such foreclosure and ‘operationalised’ through practices of violence and terrorisation brought to bear on the non-spaces of the *Adivasi* non-subject; the ‘rifle-butts and napalm’ of the policemen bringing ‘violence into the home and into the mind of the native’ (Fanon 1965: 31). The dam expunges the *Adivasi* body from a regime of the subject, enabling the most brutal forms of violence against this animal life; destroyed precisely because of its animality. The dam’s violence is both, grounded in its sublime spatial-physiological order, and first institutes it: submergence, police brutality, forcible land acquisition, ‘clearing’ operations razing entire villages to the ground, illegal arrests, and custodial torture, and ultimately killings. Sublime terror, in this sense of a subjective frontier, is always a violence done to, and on, the racialised and colonised body (Fanon 1986: 109). Transformed into the site of brutalisation, nothing more than (animal) flesh, the *Adivasi* body becomes the figure of that limit that must be excluded and so exterminated, concealed so extirpated.

Transformed into an infinitely mutable and amorphous materiality that exists at the limit of this colonial body-schema, as the savage/animal, the in/visible and the im/proper (Jackson 2020: 11). Liminal bodies – savage bodies – barred access to the dam, obscured behind it, negated, and condemned to the abyss of submergence. And yet, precisely as this abyssal point, as straddling the limit of the subject, the *Adivasi* body becomes a point of rupture and interruption. From their periphery they institute insurgences, generating cracks and fissures. In fugitive moments, the dam’s order is interrupted, played with; the universality of its colonial body-schema is put into question precisely as it performs its sublime violence. The Narmada Movement draws on this interstitial possibility of unruliness, of the possibilities of being ‘out of place’ (Ranciere 2010: 37-40; Ranciere 2011: 6) when the *Adivasi* body bursts through the dam walls and turns to face it.

And so, despite the bullets, batons, and barricades, they march their way to the dam, to stop it and undo its threshold. Precisely because the dam enacts a colonial schematisation of bodies where these liminal bodies are incapable of sublime experience, they see the dam for what it is: a deadened lump, a morbid mass of materials thrown together. The very sublime order of the dam engenders possibilities of divergence and contestation. Precisely because it expunges the *Adivasi* body as the constitutive non-subject of sublimity, they become an always-present disordering potentiality. In instituting an order of domination, the dam sets free the force(s) of its own subversion. It can (will) be stopped, it will be undone. Echoing a popular slogan from the Narmada Movement: ‘*koi nahi hatega! baandh nahi banega!*’ (Kazimi 1994).

# Walk: *Bund*s and Chiasmatic Unruliness

My suggestion here is that the Narmada Movement embraces this disordering energy always imminent in the colonial order of the dam: in marching to the site of the dam, in the slogans and hunger strikes. When members of the Movement sit cross-legged in waist-deep water near the riverbank, waiting for the dam to submerge them in a *jal-samadhi* (water-burial), what is performed is the transformation of a rigid frontier into a site of contestation, of emergences and thresholds. In other words, what I describe as a counter-sublime operation. The dam’s sublime order – spatio-physiological partitions and forms of in/visibility internal to them – is here problematised. Anthropological presuppositions anchoring such order are interrupted by an unruliness pointing towards a different relation of body and world, visible and invisible, subject and object. A transformation energised by the experience of walking along or on a *bund*. What the bund amplifies is a whole tapestry of resonances between indigenous cosmologies, political resistance, and an ethos of care that becomes the intensive point from within which the Narmada Movement performs its resistance.

The *bund* is unassuming. One is scarcely aware of walking on or beside it. It has no neat, straight lines, or smooth surfaces. All there is, are curves and gentle ridges. It presses up against a shallow ditch or depression, hugging its contours, twisting, and bending with it. Its lines are short. Interrupted. Starting and stopping abruptly. They fold back onto themselves. Merge into larger fissures. Or dissipate into cracks till they are no longer visible. Twisting and turning as they recede into an ‘inexhaustible reality, full of reserves’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 15). No large, sweeping faces. It is not a homogenised monolith, but a coming-together of disparate elements. Each rock that goes into making the *bund* is not perfectly shaped and ordered. They are what is locally available; in and of the world in which the *bund* takes its form. Each element, misshapen rocks, clumps of soil that fill in large gaps, bits of dry soil, enters complex relations of interdependence with others. Tiny cracks become shelters for plants and small animals, protecting them from the blazing summer heat. Each system is interinvolved with others, but never subsumed by another. Unlike the dam that fuses and homogenises, the *bund* holds-together plural elements that both fold into one another and maintain a degree of distinction. And in these plural intertwinings, it builds itself. Becoming a complex ‘ecosocial system’ (Tully 2020) in ways that cannot be orchestrated or designed *a priori*. A system in which the human subject is only one node.

Walking along or sitting with or beside the *bund* cannot be easily reincorporated into an image of sublime experience in a Kantian mould. The *bund* opposes the rigid distinction between a transcendental autonomous subject and the world of objects. Disclosing, in its place, a heteronomous plurality, always excessive and escaping ratio-cognitive capture. Where subject and object are not only intertwined but move dynamically, so that at points they are indistinguishable, and at others, they attain a degree of distinction in reversible and discontinuous ways. The plural interstices enacted by the *bund* complexify sublime experience, as disembodied elevation. The *bund* itself hardly rises above the waist, yet it exceeds us as it curves its way along a contour, lengthening out from us in either direction. As it lengthens, it deepens; folding into itself this multiplicity of relations (Merleau-Ponty 1979). Not just the rocks, soil, plants, and animals, but through them the forest, the earth, the human communities, and the water that it envelops and is imbricated in. A depth that is encountered in the bursting of colours in the *bund*. The red soil, the green plants, the black rocks, and the millions of hues in between, in complex constellations of colours that reveal the *bund* as an interminable depth.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A crossed situation – a chiasm – in which the seeming self-evidence and self-assurance of entities and subjects is grounded in and made possible by an intertwining of sense and sentience, subject and object to the point where ‘we no longer know which sees and which is seen’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 139). The *bund* is the dance floor of this torsion. Rending apart at precisely the point of convergence and collapse. Merleau-Ponty puts the point most clearly,

‘It is that the thickness of flesh between seer and thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of [their] corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 135)

Seen as chiasm, the *bund* is a disjunctive holding-together of elements in processes of distinction or dissolution, dissipation, and coagulation. Indeed, ‘our’ experience of the bund is an encounter with its chiasmatic form. For, it is the *bund* that ‘we’[[7]](#endnote-7) have built, and are so deeply embedded in. We sense this corporeal imbrication as we delicately attempt to balance unshaped rocks on each other and use soil to cover the larger holes. We are in the midst, forming the *bund* in much the same way that the plants, soil and water do, embedded in symbiogenetic systems of life that are the condition of possibility of all life (Tully 2020).

At the same time, however, one is always standing apart from the *bund*, independent of it. Lost, upto that point, in its myriad lines and curves, only to suddenly realise oneself as walking alongside it, and not within it. Between imbrication and extrication. Never simply the disclosure of a harmonious unity or oneness of nature, nor of human mastery and control. ‘In’ the *bund*, the sentient subject is at once also a sensed object; to touch, to grasp or to see is at once to be seen, to be tangible and yet, to not collapse into one or the other node. To remain in that mediate terrain; ‘by which all possible relations are possible’ (Trigg 2012: 144).Where the object as visible is intertwined with the invisible constellations in which it is embedded, where the invisible subject is interlaced with the visibility of its corporeal being in (and of) the world, and ultimately, where a perceiving subject and perceived object dissolve into one another as they simultaneously twist themselves apart. Neither exists in isolation from the other.

A decentring and dislocation of the perceiving subject is underway here, by an outside, an excessiveness or overflowing that is simultaneously also perceiving (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 142). The touching, sensing subject is sensed, touched by that which is beyond and exceeding it; a sort of intercorporeality ‘[extending] further than the things I touch and see at present’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 143). A depth and density that is here, surrounding us, of which we are a part, and yet against which we begin to form ourselves, stylise ourselves. The embodied proximate-distance of the chiasm is not simply a formal ontology of immanence; it is material and thick(Carman 2008: 191); ‘not nothingness, but thickness, social tissue, web of relationships, plurality of perspectives, ossifications, myths, laws…’ (Plot 2014: 39). A depth that folds within itself a concrete multiplicity in which and out of which the body and world emerge; a folding of the visible that is the encounter with ‘other landscapes besides my own’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 141). The *bund* winds its way in this heterogenous terrain.

The *bund* discloses the body within multi-layered and complex assemblages of forces that are the condition of possibility of subjectivisation (stylisation), and so at once the wellspring of a creative reimagining of such stylisation. In just the way that the *bund* folds with a complex multiplicity, the encounter with it discloses an analogous multiplicity that grounds the perceiving body/subject. In the eyes following its syncopated and discordant lines, the hands touching and feeling the textures of the rocks, grasping a blade of grass between fingers, ears listening to the rustle of dried leaves as a lizard scurries across the surface: a sort of immanent plurality of perception and the styles of being that accompany them. Against the sublime order of the dam, the *bund* uncovers an unruliness that envisions the body as intertwined with its world, as a part of and not opposed to the ecosocial systems that are its condition of life; revealing the situated plurality of modes of being (in and of the world). Against the elevation constitutive of the dam’s sublime order, the sublime experience of the *bund* is one of enlivenment.

# Dance: The Narmada Movement’s Counter-Sublime

An enlivenment towards which the Narmada Movement cultivates an affirming responsiveness. Corporeal practices of the self – drawing on the Movement’s distinctly Gandhian character[[8]](#endnote-8) – cultivate among participants an ethos of nonviolence – Ahimsa – as not simply abstaining from violence or harm, but as a cultivated responsiveness and openness to the world, to all life, in all its forms (Livingston 2018: 528). A ‘willingness to treat all being as one’s self, a complete absence of ill-will and good-will towards all life’ (Godrej 2006: 295; Livingston 2018: 516). Tully suggests this life-affirming and care-oriented vision of *Ahimsa* as a mode of responsiveness in which ‘the world begins to show up for us as not only valuable, but the condition of all value: as a living system that sustains all life’ (Tully 2020). *Ahimsa*, then, is a responsiveness to complex assemblages of ‘symbiosis and symbiogenesis’ (Tully 2020); a responsiveness to the *bund*.

As a cultivated and embodied practice, *Ahimsa* is central to the ‘demand’ made of the Movement’s participants: to ‘live in the valley’ (Bhatnagar; Dharmadhikary 2006). Much less than simply being present, to live in the valley meant to learn and work upon a certain style of being. Day-to-day routinised practices of eating and exercise, working, sociality, caring, praying, and thinking. Living in the valley is to offer the first morsel of food to the Ancestors. To patiently waiting before sowing the crop, listening for the readiness of the soil, the rains, and the grain. To cultivate humility in invoking and seeking the blessings of the forest-spirits, the snakes, and the tigers before venturing into the forest to collect plants, firewood, or nearly anything else. To suffer under the searing heat of the mid-day sun, building a *bund* in preparation for the monsoon. To cultivate care for all life; to be mindful of where one steps on the forest floor; to embrace modes of kinship that tie the individual to the communal, and the community to vast tapestries of life extending far beyond the human both spatially and temporally.

Glimpses of such responsiveness are visible across a range of communal and individual practices, but I want to focus on the communal meeting (*sabha*), and practices of song and dance that often concluded them. Baviskar draws our attention to these in her ethnographic study suggesting how it becomes a site where communal relations of kinship and care are performed, as community members narrate stories and sing songs (Baviskar 1995: 180). Legends and stories are told and re-told, elaborating cosmologies and myths that become the ground for ‘discussions about the way *Adivasis* used to live before and the way they live now, analysing their present predicament [the dam] and the lines of action open before them’ (Baviskar 1995: 181).

And, as Amit Bhatnagar, an activist in the Movement suggests, *sabhas* often transform into song and dance celebrations (Bhatnagar). Vibrations of the drum flow through those present, and the body begins to dance almost entirely by itself. It is as though the music demands the body to style itself as a flowing, dynamic intensity. The deep, metronomic bass of the drum draws the feet to tap the earth; feeling the vibrations seep into (or even, rise up from, reversibility is crucial here) the grass, soil and rocks. An often tense, but always enlivening process of what Mills calls contraction/release is underway. Moving bodies receding deeper into themselves, while extending outwards, unfolding, and reaching out to grasp the other. A churning or rhythm – an exploration of the body’s own flesh, its thickness and density. Mills shows how this movement problematises a vision of subjective autonomy, disrupts boundaries between what is internal and proper to it and what is beyond by generating relations to other bodies, their movements and the rhythms of their own contractions (Mills 2017: 21). Dancing bodies reach out and touch each other as ‘the spine unravels to the world around it; vertebra after vertebra, like a precious string of pearls…the dancer’s body becomes a changed space by a multitude of contractions.’ (Mills 2017: 13). The boundaries of body and world, of embodied movement and the phenomenological space in which it occurs are continually shifted, toyed with, and played upon. A double-horizon: the dancing body as generative of space, situating itself, and as situated in a background in which its movement is taking place (Bieszczad 2021; Merleau-Ponty 1968: 149). Gestures in which the chiasmatic moment courses – where the body is both sensual and sensed. The horizon as porous; admitting free movement (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 149). In dancing, the body enacts its liminality; performing the very threshold of (in)visibility, that transforms it into a site of radical reimagination.

Visible, conscious bodies responding to the invisible depths, to the furthest horizons into which they collapse and from which they emerge. A response to arms locking into each other, to their movements carrying each other along, to the release of bodies into the world. A response to peals of laughter as someone takes an unexpected turn, transforming the performance as a whole. Sudden twists that generate a disjunctive moment; a novelty or something unexpected. Syncopation and improvisation. Boundaries are blurred as disorientation and fluidity become celebrated modes of movement, and the contraction/release of dancing bodies is allowed to follow its own course (Goldman 2010: 107-111). Improvisation not as chaos, or pure immediacy, but a practice drawing on cultivated corporeal techniques – bodily routines/rhythms of farming, eating, walking, *bund*-building (Browning 2003; Goldman 2010: 111). To improvise is to play in the chiasm but in a specific way; drawing on a style of being and living in the valley. One that is an interruption, a disordering of the sublime forming of the body instituted in the dam.[[9]](#endnote-9) Performing a critical inquiry into who or what are the limits of a given regime of the human (the dam), and the necessity of transgressing such limits. It is a question of stylising the body into the substance of an ethical inquiry, probing processes of subjectification, and conducting a sort of work or practice of the self (Foucault 1992: 28). The sublime subject of the dam is put into question, and the body released into playful exploration. To dance is to take what is given and to tentatively and hesitantly open possibilities of difference, of alterity and transformation (Nehamas 1998: 178). Dancing in this sense is a dissolution – yet, never absolute – of the autonomous subject into that heterogenous complex of practices that are its condition of possibility and in which it is inextricably embedded. A dissolution that enables ‘the creation of new possibilities, devising and playing new games so new rules could be drawn up’ (Huijer 1999: 75).

To live in the valley, then, is to practice such an aesthetics of existence. To perform a sort of experimentation exemplified in these practices of storytelling and dance. An ecstatic embedding into the world and its multiplicity. ‘To give style to one’s character’ as Nietzsche (1974: 232) suggests - transforming life itself into a work of art and the object of aesthetic formation. The cultivation of ‘an attitude and a quest’ (Foucault 1992: 62), that enables a re-imagination of the body by way of an exploration of those performances, actions and enactments that disorder, interrupt and make unruly a given regime of the subject. Living in the valley, understood in this sense, is the practice of an aesthetic re-creation, or self-creation by way of a cultivation of the body to respond to symbiotic and symbiogenetic systems of life that are the condition of possibility of all life: to the chiasmatic moment of its interlacing with its world.

# Conclusion: Living in the Valley

At the end of Elizabeth Costello’s speech on animality and the human, in *The Lives of Animals*, a member of the audience rises to ask a question. He asks Costello, ‘Are you saying we should close down the factory farms? Are you saying we should stop eating meat? Are you saying we should treat animals more humanely, kill them more humanely?... Can you clarify?’ (Coetzee 1999: 36). I wonder if we can ask the same question in our discussion. What are the lessons of the Narmada Movement? What have we gained or learnt by listening to it and its counter-sublime operation? The dam is built, and over the first decade of the 2000s its height is raised twice, submerging even more parts of the valley. Millions living in the valley are displaced. The hunger strikes, protest marches and dances all cease – overpowered by the wall of water the dam brings to bear on them. Slogans and songs drown in the rising waters. The forests, fields, and villages that these songs evoke disappear under the reservoir.

Yet perhaps Costello’s answer provides us with an impulse to find our own here: ‘I was hoping not to enunciate principles…open your heart and listen to what your heart says.’. The discussion in this paper has been precisely such an attempt to listen. In working its way through oral histories, films, archival sources, and ethnographic studies, the attempt has been to listen to the lower frequencies and their baritone rumbling: to listen for the performance of a certain force borne of unruly and indocile bodies as they resist submergence, and to the democratising possibility immanent to such performances.

The counter-sublime operation enacted by the Movement is the performance of such force. But one that is itself doubled. Both, the unrelenting, restless, and resistant force of thousands of participants in the Movement pushing against police barricades and marching to the site of the dam to halt its construction (it is precisely this force that Kazimi’s film captures so distinctly). And the performative reimagination of the *Adivasi* body in ways that problematise the subjective order instituted in/by the dam. The four sections of this paper have tried to capture the ways in which this force generates reconfigurations of corporeal orientation: standing, marching, walking, dancing. And the bund, as a phenomenological encounter opposing and opposed to the dam is crucial here. But what is equally at work, is a certain intertwining. Marching to the site of the dam, the performative reimagination of the Adivasi body in dance, and the phenomenological encounter with the bund energise and vitalise one another in an interlacing that constitutes the Movement’s counter-sublime operation. It is in this move, that we can fully grasp the democratising force of the Narmada Movement’s resistance to the dam.

A force that draws us away from the search for prescriptions, answers, or solutions and towards an opening up of the self, of our bodies. A performance that attempts ‘to imagine and bring into being new schemas of politicisation.’ (Foucault 1980: 190). At home in the ‘crucible of events’, a vision that opens itself up to indeterminacy, contingency and the absence of stable, singular foundations (Lefort 2005: 357; Merleau-Ponty 1974: 3). A practice of ‘self-formation’ that generates ‘deterritorialised modes of being that are able to cut across disparate spaces/places and assemble a constellation of subjectivities to disrupt binaries, dualisms, universalisms, and institute total difference.’ (Tello 2022: 392-393). Here, I argue, lies the democratising possibility of the Movement, its making ‘the future formation of a “we” possible, by elaborating the question’ (Foucault 1984: 385). This is the ‘lesson’ of the Movement: opening to a future ‘we’.

There is no solution – singular – that the Narmada Movement offers up, no utopic vision it conjures, only the enlivening possibility of giving style as a continuing and persistent practice of the self. An undercurrent that in its very flowing unfolds a moment of intertwining disrupting every hardened partition of the visible and invisible – in the late-night dances, in the idle strolls along the *bund*, in the protest marches. Opening our hearts – as we who sit listening to the Movement, like Costello’s audience – means to attune ourselves to the democratising possibility exemplified here: the rhythms of a counter-sublime operation reverberating deep into the night, generating cracks in the dam’s smooth concrete.

# Endnotes

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1. *Adivasi*, literally meaning ‘original inhabitant’, is a term used by India’s indigenous communities to identify themselves as distinct from mainstream Hindu/Caste society. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The liberal use of the first-person plural in the discussion here demands some prefacing. The disjunct between two phenomenological encounters – with dam and bund – is the ground for the argument this paper makes. Yet, both are not symmetrically available to us as readers (or certainly, to most readers). In just the way that I will later argue, the dam forecloses its own encounter, its own experience as sublime to the *Adivasi* body, the bund as a site of enlivenment is foreclosed to all of us that do not live (or have not lived) in the valley. My use of the first-person plural in this paper is designed to mark these discontinuities. At the outset, ‘we’ marks a specific form or style of the subject, the ratio-cognitive subject of reason (of the dam’s sublime order) – it is we in the sense of those of us who can (who are allowed, able) to stand on the viewing galleries and look up at the dam. Yet, towards the end of this paper, this very ‘we’ has been reconfigured, just as the argument has traced a set of corporeal reorientations. Now, this ‘we’ marks the Narmada Movement, and the plural multiplicity it opens itself up to: an open-endedness made possible by living in the valley. The shift here is crucial because at stake is a question of position – of the position of a certain apparatus of western philosophy as it attempts speak to and with indigenous cosmologies and oral histories, of the position of an urban, English-speaking, upper-caste, male Indian researcher as he write on, with and about indigenous resistance in the Narmada Valley, and of the position of us reading this text, in an academic journal far removed from the valley. I do not purport to resolve these difficult and uncomfortable questions here, but to elaborate, and in this way, make possible a deeper interrogation of the manner in which the first-person plural is used here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. One may object to this attempt to think the dam as sublime within a Kantian framework arguing that Kant conceives of sublime objects as limited to objects of nature. Sublime experience, on this view, marks the limits of the transcendental aesthetic, the limits of all apprehension, and thus sublime objects are those which lie absolutely beyond representation/determination. Only natural objects can be sublime since any product of human artifice is *ipso facto* not beyond determination. This is a reading of the Kantian sublime that Lyotard, for instance, draws on in discussing the sublime as the ‘unrepresentable’ – precisely the sense that the sublime marks an *a priori* impossibility of the imagination to present the absolute (Lyotard 1994;Ranciere 2004). Yet, I argue that this is at best an incomplete reading of Kant’s account. Take, for instance, the mathematical sublime, Kant does not seem to think it limited to natural objects, though they do indeed provide fertile terrain for such experience. The reference to the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, and the Basilica of St. Peter’s in Rome suggest how Kant does admit human-made objects as sublime (Kant 2009: 82-83). The key point – side-stepping a fuller and more comprehensive discussion on this issue – and here I follow Crowther (1989: 28-29), is that Kant’s aim with the theorisation of sublimity is not so much to account for the ‘unrepresentable’, as it is to account for a particular phenomenological oddity: the profoundly ambivalent experience of being overwhelmed while at once feeling pleasure. If this is a fair reading, we can then think of the centrepiece of Kant’s account of the sublime as phenomenological – the experience of an object that *presents itself to us within our situated encounter with it*, as infinite regardless of whether it really is such (Crowther 1989: 28-29). Sublime experience in Kant seems to suggest a certain perspectival experience of infinitude, not an impossibility, but that which exceeds sense in the particular moment/situation of experience. The dam is an object of sublime experience, from our position on the viewing gallery. Its ‘real’ infinitude is, in this sense, irrelevant. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The failure of sensual apperception is not – for Kant – recovered in a concrete determination of the infinite magnitude of the mathematically sublime object, but in the *capacity* of the mind (reason) to think infinitude (Kant 2009: 89). Sublime pleasure, in this sense, is always a negative pleasure. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The interrelation of spatial and visceral orders in the dam ventriloquises Rancière’s account of a distribution of the sensible. The dam as police grounds a particular distribution of spaces and parts, of those who can speak, who can be heard, who can partake, and those who cannot (Ranciere 1999: 29-30). And crucially, as Rancière points out, spatial segmentarity is founded in and operationalised through a series of ‘perceptive givens’; ways of being, doing and saying that present themselves in an always-already manner (Ranciere 2011: 7). This is precisely the kind of spatial-physiological intertwining that I am suggesting here. The dam as sublime is a distribution of the embodied capacities for seeing and being seen, speaking, listening and being heard, for ways of life that appear as given. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. There is an important topographical shift away from (and against) Kant at this point. Where, for Kant, sublime experience is characterised by elevation, a rising above, the encounter with the *bund* generates an orthogonal reorientation. A depth – not above or below but extending outwards in every direction. It is still the experience of something utterly excessive but in terms of a recession, of a greater imbrication into ecosocial systems. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A crucial shift in the use of ‘we’ is at work here, as pointed out earlier – see n. *ii* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Consider this Gandhian ethos embodied by the Narmada movement in contrast to Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous declaration that dams are the temple of modern India (Marino, 2012). The Movement’s struggle, its interruption, or what we have been calling its disordering and unruly tendency – its counter-sublime – can also be mapped out along cracks and divergences between a Gandhian and Nehruvian imaginary of the body/subject. It is instructive that in all of Nehru’s critique of Gandhi, his alternative is always entails elevation: to lift India’s poor out of poverty, to enable its people to rise up from colonial and premodern servitude into rational modernity, and to have India rise and claim its place in the comity of industrialised and modern liberal-democracies (Baird 2003). A fuller discussion is precluded here in the interest of space, but note in this respect, that Nehru’s postcolonial vision of a modern Indian nation-state, continues to ground itself in a certain differentiation of the proper subject of such a state – a differentiation as I point out (drawing on Fanon) above, deeply embedded in colonial imaginaries. On the other hand, the Narmada movement and its Gandhian ethos, brings forth a radically different image, as we have seen. An enlivenment that locates itself in cultivated practices of the self that do not seek to extricate the body/subject from its embedded situation in the world. An ethos that seeks instead, to cultivate a certain style of being that is responsive to such imbrication. My gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. We are drawn to Fanon’s discussion of dance and coloniality (Fanon 1965: 45). Of course, Fanon dismisses dance as collapse. In the brutal conditions of colonised life, the ‘permissiveness’ of dance enacts only a discharge of the ‘most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence’ – dance becomes the very instrument of colonisation (Hall 2012: 277-278) But – as both Hall and Moten argue – Fanon is missing something, a sort of fugitivity enacted in dance that enables liberation or escape. Dance enacts, on the one hand, a disordering of space, of spatiality, uncovering the ‘polymorphous spaces of Blackness’, while on the other enabling an experience of transindividualism, of the ways that social life is constituted, energised, and performed in the colonial situation (Hall 2012: 283-284). Moten, similarly, points to the possibility of escape when he asks, ‘What is it to be an irreducibly disordering, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to the normative order, normative form?’ (Moten 2008: 180). Moten’s argument, a creative misreading of Fanon, enables us to come to terms with a fugitive movement embodied in dance. Much less than a fall or collapse, dance is a pluralising possibility. The fall itself is energising, and dance is this ‘ambivalent direction, finding the fall in the ascent, and the ascent in the fall.’ (Goldman 2010: 100;King 2004: 42). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)