



What are the boundaries of 'ecology,' of 'nature,' of 'knowing?'

# Death by Water: Environmental Documentaries, a Brief Overview

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AS FAR BACK AS 1949, FERNAND BRAUDEL IN HIS CLASSIC *THE MEDITERRANEAN*, had already warned that it was impossible for a historian to treat the environment as a slow and timeless backdrop.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it is no longer possible to see man as a “prisoner of climate” as Alfred Crosby envisaged him as late as 1995 in his important environmental survey.<sup>2</sup> Reworking both these theses, an essay by Dipesh Chakrabarty in 2009 develops the idea of the anthropocene as a critical analytic to understand the current ecological crisis and its implications for the history of humanity and a critique of global capital.<sup>3</sup> Borrowed from the scientific enquiries of Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, who used the term for the first time to describe geological time where man is himself the primary agent of environmental change, “anthropocene” has now come to connote a clock, as well as a planetary condition, where anthropos or man himself is the subject and object of large-scale planetary transformation.

The documentaries that I track below focus on the troubling and troubled sites of the anthropocene, the results of human intervention in the course of the life of water on our planet: building of dams, reservoirs and canals for hydroelectric projects, interlinking of rivers and river transfers, groundwater extraction, patrolling of seas, control of marine fishing, water wars and water piracy, and corporate takeovers, institutionalization and commercialization of water. They also look at the direct and indirect results of such human interventions, namely pollution and scarcity, environmental extremes—droughts, floods, tsunamis—as well as transnational advocacy networks that respond in rational rage against this man-made destruction of water ecosystems.

Early documentary production in India, monopolized as it was by the state-sponsored Films Division (FD) and a few scattered so-called “independents”, peddled to the newly independent nation narratives of development in which water was more than anything else a resource to be harnessed, in order to deliver the nation to modernity via large-scale

1–3  
Stills from *Neythal Diary*,  
Ravi Agarwal, 2016.

All images in this essay are by  
artist Ravi Agarwal.



4 and 5  
 Stills from *Sangam Dialogue*,  
 Ravi Agarwal, 2017.

irrigation and hydroelectric projects. And so it was that an “electrically-minded” nation fell in love with big dams. Indeed, dams were a favourite subject of FD documentaries and the films were a tribute to concrete, steel, gigantism, scientific modernity and hydroelectric power. An instance of this is captured by Peter Sutoris, who reads an interesting moment from P.V. Pathy’s *Earth and Water* (1956), told from the perspective of the happy-to-be-dammed Bhavani river, while several low-angle shots frame the sheer gigantism of the dams, juxtaposing them with monumental temples.<sup>4</sup>

As the Nehruvian developmental model unravelled through the 1960s, anti-state activism, most famously the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), against big dams began to gather critical momentum. NBA Docs/Documentaries<sup>5</sup>—from the pioneering *Kaise Jeebu Re!* (Jharna Jhaveri and Anurag Singh, 1997) to Sanjay Kak’s *Words on Water* (2002)—have played a major role in the movement. The films mobilize government-sponsored newsreels, engineering plans, budgets and public policy documents together with testimonies of those displaced by the dam—adivasis (the original inhabitants of these river basins and surrounding forests)—to create their archives of protest. Often framed against lush landscapes that are soon to disappear with the dams, these testimonies from witnesses, NBA and adivasi activists, such as Luhariya Sankariya, eloquently politicized by their loss and displacement, are used for audience mobilization in more than one film. Simanthini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan’s chronicle of the movement, *The Narmada Diary* (1995) climaxes in a face-off between NBA activists led by Medha Patkar and World Bank officials. Wherever the film has been screened since, there have been impassioned discussions and arguments proving that these activist documentaries have an afterlife that continues to sustain the movement. There are also in these documentaries, as Bishnupriya Ghosh argues, a political aesthetic and an affective cartography mobilized by the Narmada river itself—often swelling and immense—and the heroic figure of the displaced victim such as the ferryman silhouetted against the sky in Dhuru and Patwardhan’s film.<sup>6</sup>



Since the NBA Docs, many NGOs have made documentaries that address micro and macro issues related to water. Often ethnographic and pedagogical, the subjects of these films range from exploration of the city of Mumbai through its waterscapes (AHRC-funded *Liquid City: Water, Landscape and Social Formation in Twenty-first Century Mumbai*, Mathew Gandhi, 2007) to the work of the NGO Nav Jagriti in coping with flooding in North Bihar's rivers (Sanjay Barnela and Samreen Farooqi's *Living with Floods*, 2012) and the pollution of India's most sacred water body—the river Ganga (*The Sacred Balance*, Kensington Communications, 2002). Some of the ethnographic accounts include women walking for miles to fetch water in arid villages in Gujarat (*Walking for Water*, ADB, 2003); the formation of water "communities" in Lele, Nepal along caste and gender lines (*Pani-Water*, Sushma Joshi, NEWAH [Nepal Water for Health], 2001) or the heroic efforts of "paniharis" or "water women"—the women who fetch water in the desert communities of Rajasthan (*Panibari*, Abi Divan and Sudhi Rajagopal, 2004).

One of the major nodes of dissemination of these documentaries has been television. Though scant attention has been given to environmental programmes on television, a few channels like NDTV and ABN News have dedicated shows on environmental issues.<sup>7</sup> Indeed it is the state-owned and rather unglamorous Doordarshan (DD) that has actually shown a lot of environmental programmes, and even plans to launch DD-Prakriti, a 24x7 channel focused on local content that discusses environmental matters, as it was noted that the large MNC channels like Discovery and National Geographic<sup>8</sup> do not address the specific contexts in India. Typically ecological issues are relegated to Sunday features, competing as they do for TRP ratings with news and celebrity shows and TV serials. Even in the scant coverage, prominence is given to glitzy tigers and their celebrity patrons (though NDTV's *Save the Tiger* campaign has been immensely successful), mining scams, or Jairam Ramesh's controversial tenure as environment minister, rather than focusing on less visible ecological issues and the subjects of dispossession.



6 and 7  
Stills from *The Sewage Pond's Memoir*, Ravi Agarwal, 2011.

In 2017 National Geographic, along with non-profit organization Water Aid Foundation, launched *Mission Blue*, roping in industry filmmakers Hansal Mehta, Madhur Bhandarkar, Imtiaz Ali and Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury and popular stars like Farhan Akhtar in a series of short promotionals. These public service announcements (psas) are overtly pedagogical attempts to instil an awareness of water ecosystems, their scarcity and preciousness. In Nishta Jain's recent *Submerged* (2016), a film about people devastated by Bihar floods—a Virtual Reality project produced by Anand Gandhi's Memesys Culture Lab—the 360-degree camera is used to create an immersive and empathetic experience of fields submerged under flood water for the viewer.

Apart from television one of the distribution platforms of environmental films in India is CMS Vatavaran, India's bi-annual Environment and Wildlife Film Festival Forum dedicated to contemporary environmental issues. In fact, the recently concluded festival, with the theme "Conservation4water", dealt with water-related issues, highlighting problems such as Kashmir's eco-sensitive zones as well as local micro solutions such as rainwater harvesting. Featuring over 100 films, the event is supported and partnered by the Government of India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, National Geographic, UNESCO, UNDP and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

Straddling the worlds of activism and art, and exhibiting in alternative circuits, are artists like Ravi Agarwal in whose work we see the documentary impulse to save water for the planet. Agarwal, who works with photographs, video and public art installations supporting environmental causes, has exhibited internationally including at documenta11, where his works were first highlighted by Okwui Enwezor. He is also the director of Toxics Link, an environmental NGO that has done extensive studies on the toxicity of the Yamuna river and its floodplains in New Delhi. Nearly 3.8 million tonnes of untreated sewage is dumped into the river, with the city of Delhi contributing nearly 80 per cent of effluents. Agarwal also mounted the Yamuna-Elbe project in 2011 in Delhi and Hamburg in collaboration with land artist Till Krause and art historian Nina Kalenbach, to raise ecological awareness around the rivers in these two cities. The public art project held on the banks of the Yamuna and Elbe exhibited the works of many Indian artists including Atul Bhalla and Sheba Chhachhi, as well as Nana Petzet and Jochen Lempert (from Germany), among others. In Agarwal's film *The Sewage Pond's Memoir* (2011) the autobiographical interacts with the industrial and mechanical, as the water that flows turns to sewage in the Aravalli forest, and the film is told



from the sewage's point of view, pointing to a dysfunctional ecosystem. Recently Agarwal has turned his focus from rivers to seas. In *Catamaran*, on the planks of wood of a roughly-hewn fisherman's boat, are carved words from Tamil Sangam poetry: "Evening has come, soon darkness too will close in"—a telling line that captures the state of water on our planet, in the time of the anthropocene.

#### NOTES

- 1 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1949, reprinted 1996), p. 26.
- 2 Alfred Crosby Jr., "The Past and Present of Environmental History", *American Historical Review*, 100 (October 1995): 1185.
- 3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009).
- 4 Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948-75* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 132, 151-52, 159.
- 5 Some of the NBA Docs include: *A Valley Refuses to Die* (K.P. Sashi and Ratna Mathur, 1998), *Narmada: A Valley Rises* (Ali Kazimi, 1994), *The Narmada Diary* (Simanthini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan, 1995), *Kaise Jeebo Re!* (How Shall We Survive, Jharna Jhaveri and Anurag Singh, 1997), *I Will Report Honestly* (Aravinda Pillamarri, 1999), *Words on Water* (Sanjay Kak, 2002), *Drowned Out* (Fanny Armstrong, 2002), the autobiographical *My Narmada Diary* (Leena Pendharkar, 2002) and *Dam/Age* (Aradhana Seth, 2002).
- 6 Bishnupriya Ghosh, "We Shall Drown, We Shall Not Move: The Ecologies of 'Testimony' in NBA Documentaries", in Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (eds.), *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 59-82.
- 7 See Sandeep Mertia, "Environment via Television News Media in India", 2012, online article, academia.edu. Accessed on March 1, 2018.
- 8 Launched in India in 1998, the National Geographic channel now has 55 million subscribers and reaches almost 139 million viewers per month, according to the channel's statistics.