

Nation's body, river's pulse: Narratives of anti-dam politics in India

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Abstract

In the 1990s, social movements against large dams in India were celebrated for crafting a powerful challenge to dominant policies of development. These grounded struggles were acclaimed for their critique of capitalist industrialization and their advocacy for an alternative model of socially just and ecologically sustainable development. Twenty years later, as large dams continue to be built, their critics have shifted the battle off the streets to new arenas – to courts and government committees, in particular – and switched to a techno-managerial discourse of maintaining river health. What accounts for this change? This article traces the trajectory of cultural politics around Indian rivers within the larger imagination of the nation, the rise of economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism, and the emergence of environmental bureaucracies. It argues that, alongside being shaped by this context, current anti-dam campaigns also contend with the legacy of earlier social movements, their gains as well as losses. This political field has narrowed the potential for radical critique, large-scale collective mobilization and, ultimately, keeping rivers alive.