

H-Net Reviews

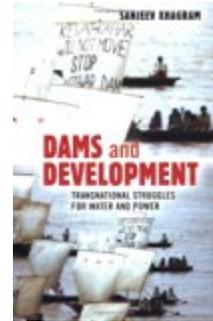
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sanjeev Khagram. *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8907-5.

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The controversies over big dams, and the aggressive promotion of such development projects by multinational organizations like the World Bank, have produced an extensive literature written mostly by environmental and social justice activists reacting to the loss of wildlife, often violent human displacements, and the fiscal costs associated with big dams. A welcome addition to this field, *Dams and Development* is the first monograph published by Sanjeev Khagram, a political scientist at the University of Washington. Pulling back somewhat from the activist literature, Khagram assumes a more distant view in order to explain why, after the 1970s, big dams as a development model seemed to fall so precipitously out of favor among governments and development agencies. Khagram's previous work on transnational social movements informs this study of anti-dam activism as he reconstructs the international networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), local activists, and institutions that during the latter twentieth century acted to contest and reform development models that uncritically relied on big dams. Taking India as a case study, and in particular the series of damming schemes in the Narmada Valley, Khagram argues that transnational alliances of anti-dam activists have "dramatically altered the dynamics surrounding big dams from the local to the international levels," affecting not only the scale but also the actual policies that guide large development projects (p. 3). Further, Khagram identifies two principle variables on which the success of anti-dam campaigns hinge: the extent to which local activists in developing countries are able to internationalize their campaigns, linking up with donors and lobbyists in the United States or Europe; and the degree of democratization in the country concerned. According to Khagram, successful anti-dam movements

depended on both a robust network of international activists as well as democratic domestic political systems.

Khagram begins the book by elaborating his theoretical framework and general argument. He reviews the rise of the "big dam regime" and its unexplained fall by the 1990s. After noting the inadequacy of technical or financial constraints in explaining the precipitous decline of dam construction worldwide after a century of enthusiastic growth, Khagram details how transnational alliances and democratic institutions facilitated a global shift in norms in relation to the environment, human rights, and indigenous peoples.

Chapters 2 through 4 constitute the heart of the book, exploring India's infatuation and subsequent disillusionment with dams after the Second World War. In chapter 2, Khagram briefly recounts the rise of big dams as a development model and applies his theoretical arguments to the case of the Silent Valley—the world's first successful transnational campaign to stop a major dam project, according to the author. He then proceeds to question why, despite an apparent lack of financial or technical constraints, dam building across India declined rapidly after the 1970s. Visiting a series of sites in the subcontinent, Khagram points to the alliances between local activists and international NGOs that, he says, were the motive force behind the decline in dam construction. He also enumerates a group of countervailing trends that worked against anti-dam campaigns, notably a revamped lobbying campaign by dam boosters, the emergence of neoliberal ideology among third world leaders, and a right-wing Hindu nationalist movement that quashed the voices of many anti-dam activists.

Chapter 3 ventures into the history of India's mon-

umental plans to dam the Narmada Valley. Khagram is keen to note that local resistance met virtually every proposed dam, but that it was ineffective without the support of international organizations that could pressure Western legislators and World Bank managers. He asserts the emergence of a global set of norms pertaining to environmental conservation, human rights, and the protection of indigenous peoples as an essential factor in the success of the anti-dam movements in reforming policies at the bank. Chapter 4 chronicles the major events that eventually led the World Bank to withdraw funding from the Narmada projects in 1993, highlighting the consolidation of the anti-dam coalition in the late 1980s after a momentary split. Here Khagram emphasizes the role that India's democratic institutions—notably the judiciary—played in upholding settlements that favored the anti-dam coalitions within India's borders.

The focus shifts in chapter 5 from India to a comparative analysis of dam building and resistance. The author reviews examples from Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and China. He evaluates the success of anti-dam movements in each of the five countries, arguing that the outcome can be understood as a product of the two factors—international social mobilization and domestic democratization—that he identifies in the first chapter. According to Khagram, Brazil's relatively democratic political system and the close ties between local activists and international NGOs successfully stopped the damming of the Xingu River. In South Africa and Indonesia, authoritarian regimes limited the strength of transnational anti-dam movements, even in spite of Indonesia's relatively well-organized campaigns of resistance. China, lacking both democratic institutions and meaningful social mobilization, has yet to witness any effective resistance to dam building.

The final chapter again alters course, placing the rise of anti-dam movements in global perspective. Khagram locates the origins of the turn away from dams in the 1990s among environmental activism in the United States and Europe from the 1960s. While acknowledging that local resistance to dams has always been present, if ineffective, in the third world, Khagram emphasizes the role played by international NGOs in changing the discourse and policies surrounding dams. Of particular importance were the campaigns to reform dam policy at the World Bank, which were notable for their public visibility and effective coordination between local activists and operatives in a position to influence managers at the bank and their political backers in the United States and Europe. Khagram holds up a series of major declarations,

internal reviews by the bank, and the reformist tone of the World Commission on Dams as evidence for the success of these anti-dam coalitions in bringing an end to the big dam regime. Khagram concludes with a review of alternative explanations of the global decline of dam construction and reaffirms his argument, allowing that the anti-dam movement probably contributed little toward the adoption of new sustainable development models that substantially reduced poverty.

The most valuable contribution of this book is its placement of the anti-dam movement within a framework of global changes in development praxis and international norms governing the rights of indigenous peoples. Critics of big dams often discuss the global reach of large organizations like the World Bank, but rarely are the bank's antagonists given such geographical breadth. Too often, commentators present indigenous communities as passive, tragic victims of an inexorable modernizing state. Leveraged through international networks of NGOs, Khagram demonstrates the agency of marginalized peoples as well as the institutional and political obstacles that they face.

Given the valuable contribution just mentioned, a number of concerns ought to be raised with this book. The first is the author's too easy dismissal of alternative explanations for the turn away from dams during the 1980s, especially the turn to austerity over stimulus at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In Latin America, dams and their associated projects were a major contributor to the fiscal problems that boiled into the debt crises starting in the late 1970s. Governments and lenders (public and private) were reluctant to undertake big dams at a time of economic uncertainty and shrinking budgets, even if dams retained their appeal as monuments to progress.

One might also like to see more direct evidence connecting the anti-dam movement to specific and transformative changes in World Bank policy or international norms vis-à-vis indigenous peoples and human rights. The relative absence of such evidence in the face of a global resurgence of big dam construction in the first decade of the twenty-first century (again funded by the World Bank) somewhat undermines the argument that transnational anti-dam networks did, in fact, affect real change in attitudes toward modernization, development, or the rights of indigenous peoples. Likewise, the author's treatment of Brazil—especially its democratic credentials—glosses over important contradictions in that nation's political history and the limited access to power

by poor Brazilians. Brazil's newly minted president—formerly a leftist guerrilla and once a dedicated opponent of the Xingu River dam—is now its most prominent booster and has been accused of suppressing the legal petitions brought against the dam by the indigenous communities it will displace. This suggests that the allure of big ticket modernization projects like dams has over-ridden the democratic politics and international alliances

that Khagram has proposed as its remedy. Reading this book in 2011, one is left with a sense that the author would have benefited from a more critical view of World Bank reports and the efficacy of UN declarations. On first glance, the argument is compelling and optimistic, but a skeptical look at the sources cited reveals some weak evidentiary foundations.

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