

Struggles

Bursting the Dam of Protest: From the Frontlines of an Andolan on the Streets of Delhi

Monday 1 May 2006, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: May 2006).

As she broke her 20-day fast last night, surrounded by hundreds of supporters, Medha Patkar was very clear that this was no victory. Rather, she was breaking the fast to intensify the fight - the two-week fight for truth and justice that the Supreme Court has imposed on the Andolan (Movement). She asked the JNU Students' Union President Mona Das to speak, exposing the BJP-Congress tango and the prevarication of the Supreme Court. And then, in a voice that, despite the weakness, rang with conviction and challenge, Medha Patkar called upon all to join the fight of 'Modi vs. Gandhi, Modi vs Ambedkar, Modi vs. Marx and Modi vs Lohia'. And as she took on Modi, she poured shame on Manmohan - for succumbing to pressure from Modi's lumpen threats and his 5-star fast, rather than standing true to his 'human face' promises and heeding the voice of the 20-day hunger-strikers and his own Ministers' report. And finally, she promised the Supreme Court and the people of the country that the Andolan would make the next two weeks a time for a 'Pol-Khol Abhiyan' - an Exposure Campaign that would reveal the truth about rehabilitation in the Valley, and expose the reality of the Sardar Sarovar's claims of providing drinking water, irrigation and power.

Across the street, activists agitating for justice for the victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy too broke their hunger strike, since they won some long-pending demands from Manmohan - a time-bound plan for delivery of safe drinking water; a scientific assessment of the spread of toxic contamination; funds to address all health issues related to the tragedy. But the Prime Minister (PM), shamefully, refused their two most crucial demands: to prosecute Warren Anderson and to blacklist Dow Chemicals! Far from it, Dow is all set to invest in two huge petrochemical complexes - in Haldia in West Bengal and Vizag in Andhra Pradesh - with help from none other than the Planning Commission. Manmohan's unbreakable commitment to a model of 'development' that serves killer corporates rather than aam aadmi (common person), and the UPA's oneness with Modi on this question, is nakedly obvious.

Ek Sau Das...Ab Bas (110...That's Enough)!

When the first lot of NBA activists arrived to stage a dharna at the Water Resources Ministry on March 17, there was very little hope. On 8 March, as women in the Valley were celebrating Women's Day, news came through that the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) had taken a decision to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam from 110 metres to 121.5 metres. The NBA activists had made it to Delhi to ask: how could the NCA take such a decision when 10,000 families whose lands were submerged at 110 metres, awaited rehabilitation? When over 35,000 thousands of families whose homes and lands stood to be submerged if the dam height was raised, were yet to be resettled? The Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) Award upheld by the Supreme Court had ordered that rehabilitation could only mean 'land for land'; that agricultural land for rehabilitation must be identified and approved a full year before dam construction, and all displaced families must be fully resettled 6 months before dam height could be raised. Wasn't the NCA decision violating all these

stipulations?

Speaking to Medha Patkar on March 25, after their dharna was forcibly shifted by police to Jantar Mantar, one could sense that the Andolan had its back to the wall; it was facing what looked like a final battle. The song and slogan of 'Koi nahin hatega to baandh kaise banega' (If no one moves out, how will they build the dam?) could be heard in plaintive defiance. But Medha said with a tired smile - we know they're willing to drown people, to shoot people who stand in the way. And the slogan of the moment was now 'Ek sau das...ab bas!' (110 - That's Enough!)

From 'Koi nahin hatega...baandh nahin banega' to 'Ek sau das...ab bas!': if the Sardar Sarovar Dam is forcing the river Narmada to change course, twenty years of tough struggle, with few victories and several defeats, has forced the Narmada Bachao Andolan to make several twists and turns.

As the height of the dam kept increasing, all the institutions set up in the name of ensuring rights of the displaced - Rehabilitation & Resettlement (R&R) Sub-Committee of the Narmada Control Authority, the Grievance Redressal Authority (GRA), - served only to cover up the colossal denial of justice to thousands of displaced families. Action Taken Reports (ATRs) submitted by State Governments lied. Elaborate resettlement colonies with the best of facilities and comforts came up - but only on paper! The bulk of the displaced were in MP, and here, successive Chief Ministers, be they Digvijay Singh of the Congress or Shivraj Chauhan of the BJP, had declared that agricultural land was simply unavailable. The MP State Government, in blatant violation of the Supreme Court stipulation of 'land for land', was handing out cash packages in lieu of land to displaced people.

Twenty Days of Hunger Fast

It was to challenge these lies that the movement began this summer - in a desperate bid to halt dam construction and ensure rehabilitation before the approaching monsoon. In Delhi, on March 29, Medha Patkar and two others - Jam Singh Nargave and Bhagawati Patidar, eventually began an indefinite hunger strike. On April 3, a Jan Sunwai was held at Parliament Street. Gradually, Delhi began to stir, but in that first week, Medha became weak alarmingly soon. Speaking to All India Students' Association (AISA) activists from Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) who sat on relay hunger fast in solidarity, Medha's tears flowed easily. But she resisted the attempts of all wellwishers who sought to make her health an issue to persuade her to give up the fast.

In the evening of April 5, a few individuals managed an informal appointment with the Home Minister Shivraj Patil. Patil minced no words: "When there is no land, am I supposed to produce land from the sky? Displaced people can take cash if they wish." The same evening, a Cabinet Meeting was held, and it was reported that the Police Commissioner himself was summoned to this meeting. Immediately after, a huge contingent of police marched to the dharna spot at Jantar Mantar, roughed up the supporters including women, and forcibly carried off Medha Patkar and Jam Singh Nargave. The police missed Bhagawati Patidar, however. The night was spent bailing out the activists who had been arrested and kept in the Parliament Street thana. At the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Medha Patkar continued her fast, refusing to allow doctors to administer IV to her.

The arrest of Medha Patkar was an obvious move to scuttle the movement at Jantar Mantar - but it had the opposite effect. The same night, JNU Professor Kamal Mitra Chenoy, JNUSU President Mona Das, Vice-President Dhananjay and AISA JNU Secretary Awadhesh joined the hunger strike; so did two activists from the slums of Delhi. And the next day saw waves of people thronging the dharna site. Kavita Srivastava, Peoples Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) activist from Jaipur, Vimal and Rajendra Ravi of the NAPM, activists of the Delhi slum dwellers' group Jan Sangharsh Vahini, Kavita Krishnan, President of AISA - all camped at Jantar Mantar to lead the movement. Kumudini Pati of

AIPWA and Annie Raja of NFIW as well as several other women's groups sat on relay hunger fasts. Writers and filmmakers - Arundhati Roy, Sanjay Kak, Revathy R, Sagari Chhabra, Jharna Jhaveri - came daily, to meet the protestors, plan the protest actions, even write press handouts and address public meetings. School students, jhuggi dwellers of Delhi, teachers and students from the three Universities, cultural activists, came all day to the dharna spot. Huge banners and posters united the dharna sites of the NBA and Bhopal victims across the street, as protestors reclaimed the street and overflowed the boundaries 'permitted' by the police.

UPA Govt. Suppresses and Disowns Its Own GoM's Report

On April 7, a Group of Ministers (GoM) led by Soz finally visited the dam-affected sites in MP. Accompanied by some 50 cars full of officials, the GoM's intention was to carefully avoid the already submerged villages where people continued to cling on, deprived of rehabilitation. Their plan was to spend a mere four hours in the area - but their superficial itinerary was interrupted and taken over by several gheraos by masses of people, who forced the GoM to attend huge mass meetings where people freely aired their grievances. Independent observers Prashant Bhushan and B.D. Sharma accompanied the Ministers everywhere. In Delhi, on the same day, the protestors, against their own instincts, saw a faint glimmer of hope. 'We showed them!', was the gleeful cry that NBA activists could not restrain. After that visit, surely the GoM's report would be hard evidence of violation of Supreme Court orders on prior rehabilitation - and surely the UPA Government would have to heed its own Ministers' words and stop construction of the dam?

But day after day passed, and it became clear that the Report was being suppressed. Also, a case of 'suicide' had been lodged against Medha; while other NBA activists had a host of criminal charges against them. On April 11, Medha Patkar issued an appeal to her supporters to break their week-long fast and intensify other forms of struggle; in response to this, Mona, Awadhesh and Professor Chenoy broke their fast, and began mobilising street protests demanding that the Report be made public. On 12 April, a massive Jan Sammelan was held at Parliament Street. In the evening on 14 April, AISA and Forum for Democratic Initiatives played a leading role in organising a huge Citizens' March on the streets of Delhi in solidarity with the Narmada and Bhopal struggles.

Congress-BJP Unity Against the Movement

On 15 April, a meeting of the Review Committee of the NCA was held. The Review Committee was split down the middle; Soz recommended a halt to dam construction in view of Madhya Pradesh's failure to rehabilitate people, but the 3 BJP CMs led by Modi opposed his proposal. According to the Supreme Court, in case of a tie in the Review Committee, the Prime Minister's decision would be final and binding on all; but by evening, it became clear that the PM had washed his hands off the matter and was passing the buck back to the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Modi declared a 51-hour hunger strike, and issued several threats of violence. The Congress in Gujarat, led by Sonia Gandhi's own political advisor Ahmad Patel, declared a Gujarat Bandh, which they called off only when the PM himself made an assurance that dam construction would not be stopped. The NBA office was attacked in Baroda by a mob of BJP and Youth Congress goons. The Prime Minister found time to meet Modi as well as several contingents of BJP MPs, but when leaders of the movement went to his house to submit a memorandum and demand a meeting, they were arrested and detained for several hours.

The Supreme Court's Balancing Act

On April 17, the Supreme Court heard the petition of the NBA. The 3 Ministers' Report clearly states that rehabilitation work in Madhya Pradesh alone will take at least a year. By promising in its affidavit that it would complete the rehabilitation process in 3 months, the UPA Government lied in

court and contradicted the word of its own Ministers, to placate Narendra Modi!

Even the Supreme Court made it clear that the poor cannot expect any real or timely justice from the highest Court in the land. True, the Supreme Court did state that it would stop dam construction if it was found that rehabilitation had not taken place in compliance with its rules. But it also delayed the entire process till May 1: during which time the dam will keep growing higher, and more and more villages will face the threat of submergence in the coming monsoon. Surely, the Court's promise would have carried more weight if it had stopped construction while seeking out more facts about the rehabilitation reality?

The Ministers' Report categorically stated that all claims of rehabilitation in MP had been mere 'paperwork' with no relevance to the 'situation on the ground'. But, amazingly, the Chief Justice himself dismissed the report of the Central Ministers as an 'ocular impression' based on just two days' visit. Why did the Honourable Chief Justice never enquire why no one from the Government or the Rehabilitation & Resettlement sub-group of the Narmada Control Authority had ever visited the Valley to assess the situation before clearing the decision to raise dam height?

The Supreme Court also stated that a decision was impossible in a "charged and emotive atmosphere", and also branded the ongoing protests as a threat to "unity and integrity of the country. Such observations were also heard in the Clemenceau case - and it is a new and dangerous trend on part of the Court, to muzzle protest by claiming that it endangers the judicial process.

Lessons of the Movement

If the movement exposed the Modi-Manmohan unity and ripped off the UPA's human face mask, it also raised some questions about the CPI-CPI(M)'s position. While CPI-CPI(M) leaders did express solidarity with the movement at Jantar Mantar, many activists asked why these did not so much as call a Press Conference to lambast Modi's fascist tactics and to demand that Manmohan Singh intervene to uphold the rule of law.

The favourite argument peddled by several academics like Y K Alagh and B G Verghese is that some sacrifice is called for at the sacred altar of development. One wonders, surely land reform is the foundation stone of development in an agrarian country like India? But how come no Government ensured that big landowners made the necessary 'sacrifice' called for by land reform? In fact, land struggles by revolutionary left movements to redistribute ceiling-surplus lands illegally held by landlords, is branded as 'terrorism' and faces brutal repression. Snatching land from the poor to hand over to corporations is 'development'; but attempting to secure illegally held lands from the rich is an unforgivable act of 'terrorism'!

One interesting new dimension to the NBA's own experience is its willingness to experiment with land struggles. The people displaced at 110 metres who were denied land did occupy cleared forest land, declaring a 'Bhoomi Hakk Satyagraha'. NBA activists say that that particular experiment was unsuccessful - because of some local contradictions, but that they fully intend to plan such land struggles again.

The Supreme Court and the PM are fully expected to play football with the issue of the displaced peoples' lives. But whatever the immediate outcome, the remarkable month-long movement has the potential to emerge as a people's front against the anti-people policies of the ruling establishment. Displacement in itself is an issue with mammoth dimensions; in Delhi itself, thousands face bulldozers as their slums are demolished. But the challenge is to go beyond the single issue of displacement, see its links with the policies dictated to India's ruling class by its imperialist masters, and to put up a vigorous and comprehensive ideological-political resistance. It remains to be seen

whether the movement arrives at a logical political conclusion and evolves as a popular front of peoples' struggles.

P.S.

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