

Recovering the Lost Tongue - A Manifesto of Anarcho-Environmentalism

Rahul Banerjee, 74 Krishnodayanagar, Indore, India - 452001, cell no: +919425943023

email: rahul.indauri@gmail.com homepage: www.rahulbanerjee.notlong.com

Chapter 10 - Following the Heart

Bhopal is a lovely city. There is the original old world town in the middle with the laid back ambience of the Nawabs in between the two lakes that had been presciently built by them to cleverly harvest the rainfall in the nearby hilly catchment for the needs of the town. Then there is the new modern planned city to accommodate the netas - political leaders and the babus - bureaucrats of the post-independence dispensation, which has been built on the undulating hills adjacent to the old town. Bhopal, despite being a very small town at the time of independence, the only claim to fame being the cricketing prowess of its princes who captained India in tests, was made the capital city of Madhya Pradesh as a compromise, as the competing political leaders of the cities of Indore, Gwalior and Jabalpur could not countenance any one of these becoming the capital ahead of the others. Madhya Pradesh itself was formed by default by clubbing together the vast area in the middle of India that remained unclaimed by other more articulate linguistic and cultural sub-nationalities bordering it, once the states reorganisation process began in the mid nineteen fifties.

The original Madhya Pradesh consisting of the present Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states was a heterogeneous state with little similarity between its different parts except for the highly feudal nature of its socio-economic structure and the deeply colonial attitude of its bureaucracy. It is also rich in natural resources like forests and minerals, which are in areas mainly inhabited by the adivasis. Very soon the state began providing these resources at subsidised prices to the business magnates as raw materials for their plants and in return the latter contributed generously to the finances of the mainstream political parties, especially the Congress which ruled without a break till 1977. So within a few years the nascent national capitalist class became the newest and most powerful player in the political economy of the state in tune with a similar development taking place all over India (Gadgil, 1962). The adivasis, as mentioned earlier, had perforce to begin sinking further and further into a dreary abyss of poverty and neglect. The political geography of Bhopal, not surprisingly, reflects the socio-economic power distribution in the state. The highest point on the highest hill in the middle of the city is occupied by a temple built by the Birlas, the largest corporate house in India at that time till its later division after the demise of its founder Ghanashyamdas Birla, on land given them free for the purpose by the government, called the Birla Temple. Just below this is the Secretariat building housing the offices of the senior bureaucrats and the ministers, the largely feudal political leaders and much much lower down the hill is the hostel, which houses the ordinary representatives of the people, the members of the legislative assembly. The legislative assembly itself used to be situated at the bottom of the hill till the new one was built next to the Birla temple a few years ago. The poor adivasis of course have to live in makeshift shelters on the roadsides when they come to Bhopal to work as construction labourers.

Initially in the nineteen fifties there were vibrant anti-feudal peasant and labour movements of the Communist Party of India and the Socialist Party of India in the state. They were strong enough in some districts to send representatives both to the parliament and to the state legislature. However, in tune with the strategy adopted all over India by the Congress party after independence, heavy police repression was let loose on these movements and their leaders and active workers were frequently jailed under preventive detention laws or were implicated in false criminal cases (SPI, 1959). The British policy of carrot and stick was followed diligently by the new rulers with the help of the bureaucrats

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who had become past masters at it under British tutelage prior to independence. So by the mid nineteen sixties these movements were marginalised and most of their leaders absorbed into the mainstream political process being run by the Congress party. The peasant movements were crushed and the trade unions lost their political character remaining content to agitate desultorily around wage demands.

In the nineteen seventies there was another spurt of radical activity in the state challenging the centralised and top down models of development, education and health services. The Vidushak Karkhana in Shahdol district and Kishore Bharati in Hoshangabad district began experimenting with bottom up approaches to the solution of problems arising from the sad marriage between feudalism, modern industrial development and a colonial bureaucratic culture. These two organisations broke out of the centralised party based models of social and political action followed by the Communists and Socialists and instead began a participatory educative process with the oppressed sections with whom they worked. The Vidushak Karkhana began by trying to initiate a process of formulation of a "People's Plan" by the masses involved in production. The role of the activists was to be one of only facilitating the process by which the people themselves could formulate and then implement their own plan (Roy et al, 1982) . Kishore Bharati was more involved with reforming the education and health sectors through a similar process of involvement of the people in formulation of their own systems with help from the activists. In both instances highly qualified scientists and technologists from elite institutions in India and abroad moved into remote rural areas in an attempt to bring cutting edge science to bear on the problems of the people residing in those areas. Unfortunately both these experiments could not muster enough mass support to tackle the entrenched power structures and so got dissipated without making much of a local impact. However, the theoretical output of these organisations has enriched the environmental movements in this country in various ways, forming an important part of the sprawling ideology of mass environmentalism in this country.

This was when the city of Bhopal and so also the state of Madhya Pradesh made their debut on the international media scene with a dubious bang in 1984 when a lethal gas leaked out in the middle of the night on December 3rd from a pesticide factory of the American multinational corporation (MNC) Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) situated on its outskirts, killing thousands of people. The then Chief Minister on learning of this is rumoured to have immediately taken himself off from his official residence which was in the line of the wind blowing the gas to his palatial bungalow overlooking the Kerva dam about twenty kilometers away and directed damage control operations over wireless from there (Lapierre & Moro, 2001). The first orders he gave the Superintendent of Police were to position his men so as to push back the masses of the people, who too were trying to flee like himself, so as to downplay the seriousness of the crisis. So strong were these rumours and their indictment of his lack of responsibility that his secretariat had to issue a press note denying them in toto after a few days (Navbharat, 1984).

The next thing he did perhaps to amend for his initial callousness was to arrest the chairman of UCC Warren Anderson when he came to visit the site immediately after the disaster. The Government of India in its wisdom, however, decided to release him after a few hours on a measly bail of just Rupees twenty thousand. Anderson seized the opportunity provided to wing back to the US and has since been absconding from the hearings of the criminal cases that were filed and which are still pending even after twenty years have gone by. Given the fact that the government has not been able to extradite

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relatively less powerful people from the underworld like Dawood Ibrahim, there is little possibility of its being able to bring Anderson to book. The government showing even greater wisdom enacted an Act in parliament delegating to itself the responsibility of filing the tort case for damages against UCC in the US on behalf of all the affected people. Then it proceeded to file a claim of 3.3 billion US dollars only and made a hash of its legal representations before the US trial court, which finally directed that the case should be heard in India itself and the decision by the Indian court would be binding on the UCC. In this way the Americans cleverly let themselves out of the enormous costs that they would have had to bear in the form of the bankruptcy and liquidation of a star MNC like UCC, had the case been decided in the US (Kurzman, 1987).

In the event in an infamous deal the Government of India in 1989 settled for a paltry compensation of just US dollars Four hundred and seventy million, which was just one seventh of the amount that it had originally asked for. Third World lives after all count for little in the global market place. The Bhopal disaster was a sudden explosive eye opener to the fact that the MNCs of the developed world regularly transfer hazardous wastes and hazardous manufacturing processes to the third world countries (Brigden et al, 2005). Indeed some years later the Chief Economist of the World Bank was to say in a note circulated among some of his colleagues - " Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the less developed countries?" (Ray, 1992 pp 111). The reasons advanced in support of this argument were that the costs of losses due to pollution in the Third World were low because the wages there were low and that since their environments were cleaner than the First World they could absorb more pollutants. The Economist magazine which exposed this note supported this argument stating that since third world governments wanted to develop their economies and there was no way to do so without polluting their environments, they might as well take those industries that could not be economically run in the first world anymore due to stringent environmental regulations (Ray, op cit). This is exactly the logic that had earlier resulted in the UCC plant being set up in Bhopal and run with far lower safety standards than the one that the corporation was running in the US. All this reflects very poorly on the Indian Government, which has failed to protect the lives and entitlements of its poor citizens, so as to be able to provide benefits to the Indian capitalist class, which latter sees its profit in playing second fiddle to the MNCs, since the costs are to be borne by the masses.

The civil society response to the gas disaster, on the contrary, has been one of the high water marks of environmentalist political action in India and it set off a series of new, more militant and effective mass environmental mobilisations throughout the country. The activists of Kishore Bharati immediately came down to Bhopal and joined hands with the trade unions to form the Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha. This organisation began agitating for the provision of proper relief to the affected persons and for taking adequate legal steps to pin down the responsibility on UCC. Since the government was clearly bent on abdicating its responsibility of cornering UCC, this organisation built up links with civil rights organisations in the US to put pressure on the government there and also to take up legal action in the courts. Later the Morcha along with a few other organisations set up a clinic to provide proper treatment to the survivors. One of the blackest acts of the government in the early days after the gas leak was to obfuscate with regard to the nature of the gas that leaked from the tanks of the factory. This was at the behest of UCC because the graveness of its culpability depended on how lethal the gas was. The less lethal the gas and its effects on the people the less the culpability of the UCC and so there was a

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continuous effort to deny that the gas that leaked was methyl iso-cyanate which is extremely lethal. The treatment for those exposed to the gas would naturally also vary according to the nature of the gas. Since the government was denying that the gas that leaked was methyl iso-cyanate so the treatment being provided by the government hospitals also was not suitable. The Morcha clinic, however, began providing treatment in accordance with the assumption that the gas was indeed methyl iso-cyanate and so the results were also very good. The government responded by closing down this clinic and arresting its doctors. Small wonder that the results of the epidemiological studies conducted for over a decade by the ICMR before being abruptly stopped have not been made public.

Faced with repression and apathy from the government and beset with internal problems leading to a split in the Morcha it gradually lost its mass power. Once the settlement was reached with the UCC in 1989 the payment of claims too began and so the people slowly got involved in this process and lost the urge to agitate further. However, a splinter organisation named Bhopal Gas Peedith Mahila Udyog Sangathan continued to fight for a better deal in the courts in this country and abroad and also in the streets. The indefatigable efforts of two affected ladies from Bhopal - Rameeza Bee and Champa Devi are exemplary of the fighting spirit that lies hidden in our masses. They not only kept their struggle and the memory of the mass murder alive by organising a rally and a meeting on the anniversary of the gas leak every year but also led their organisation to participate in all the other mass environmental struggles that were taking place in the country and played a stellar role in putting up a joint front against the destructive and iniquitous development policies of the government ably supported by activists both Indian and American. One particularly valiant ongoing effort of theirs has been the "Jharoo Maro Abhiyan" - broom and sweep clean campaign. They have consistently gone to various fora in the world with their brooms as symbols of their demand that the UCC and now Dow Chemicals, which bought it and made it into its subsidiary later, clean up the environmental mess around the factory in Bhopal and pay a proper enhanced compensation to the victims.

These ladies had the crucial last laugh when they put one over the government in a telling manner eventually two decades after the actual disaster. Used to cheating the masses at will the central government had disbursed paltry amounts as compensation to the affected people from the money given by the UCC as compensation. In the meantime the remaining corpus kept with the Reserve Bank of India in a dollar denominated account had accumulated compound interest as well as appreciated in rupee terms and become a whopping Rupees fifteen hundred odd crores. Despite repeated representations that this money should be disbursed in full to the affected people the government refused to do so. The ladies through their organisation petitioned the Supreme Court demanding that the whole of the amount be disbursed to the affected people. To create public opinion during the pendency of the case they held several sit-ins and hunger strikes in Delhi and Bhopal. The Supreme Court in one of the most important judgments it has ever delivered allowed this petition in 2004 (Venkatesh, 2004) and so the government has had to backtrack and begin giving the people their due.

What is more this judgment put its imprimatur on the findings of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation Department that the number of deaths due to the gas leak have been 15,310 and the other casualties 5,54,895. Whereas the settlement with the UCC in 1989 had been on the tentative estimate of 3000 deaths and 1,02,000 other casualties only. A fivefold increase in casualties has taken place thus giving a strong legal

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basis to the demand that Dow Chemicals pay more compensation. The significance of this victory resulting from the doggedness with which the two ladies have pursued this struggle sunk in to me the other day when my neighbour's wife in Indore said that she was going to Bhopal to receive her second instalment of compensation as an affected person of the gas leak. She had been a teenaged girl residing in Bhopal when the gas leak took place and had been registered as an affected person and got some token compensation earlier. Now because of the Supreme Court's order she was getting another instalment. She was extremely happy and was all praise for the government for being so considerate as to pay her this huge sum of money! Rashida Bee and Champa Devi have been jointly awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2004 for their tenacious battle for environmental justice. Earlier in 1992 it was awarded to Medha Patkar for her battle to save the Narmada.

This then was Bhopal, the heart of the country and the home to one of its best and longest surviving environmental movements, where we were to congregate for drawing up a blueprint for a countrywide movement against destructive development. We couldn't do better than follow the heart could we when its people had fought so valiantly against the worst manmade environmental disaster the world has ever witnessed? The meeting went off well being very well attended by NGOs and mass organisations from across the country. At its conclusion the first nationwide environmental movement, Jan Vikas Andolan, was launched, its executive committee elected and a programme of action was decided upon. There was a lot of euphoria at the time but the Jan Vikas Andolan failed later to fulfil its initial promise as too many anarcho-environmentalist cooks spoiled its socio-political broth! The day the meeting was ending there came news that a World Bank team had come to Bhopal and was to have meetings with the Government of Madhya Pradesh regarding its application for a loan to fund the construction of the Indira Sagar Dam at Punasa. A secret conclave was called and it was decided that this team would be surrounded by a select group of activists the next morning as it left its hotel in a car to attend its meeting.

Early next morning we were all at the hotel. One of the activists in our group knew the Indian member in the World Bank team so he and I went in to the hotel while the rest of the group waited outside the gates. I stationed myself near the car reserved for the World Bank team by finding out discretely from the drivers as to which one it was. The person who knew the World Bank team member went inside and had a desultory conversation with him to ascertain the time the team would be leaving and then went back to wait with the rest of our group outside the gates. As soon as the World Bank team got into their car and the car eased its way out of the porch I began waving my sweater as a pre-determined signal to those at the gate that our prey was on its way. The car had just crossed the gates where it had to slow down to negotiate the cattle trap when our group of people shouting slogans of "World Bank Go Back" surrounded it. I too sprinted behind the car and jumped on to its roof to do a jig so as not to be left out of the shindig! Within twenty minutes the police were there in force and we were all packed into a bus and taken to Bhopal jail. Normally such arrests are a formality and the arrested people are let off soon. However, the administration did not want to take any chances and so we were locked up for the whole three days of the World Bank team's stay in Bhopal.

This outing in the Bhopal Central Jail proved to be a very entertaining and educative one. We were around thirty people from all over India all activists of various mass movements. Medha Patkar was the only woman and so she was locked up alone in

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the women's ward. A special barrack was opened for the rest of us. We had hardly settled down when we got the news that Medha had gone on a hunger strike and so we too decided to follow suit and did not take the lunch that was offered us. With so many headstrong and quirky individuals, who did not know each other very well, cooped up together in one room, fireworks were inevitable sooner or later. The first serious altercation ensued in the afternoon when a regular inmate of the jail came with a big cauldron full of hot steaming tea. The cup that warms but does not inebriate was particularly desirable in the biting cold within a prison surrounded by dank walls. But a debate at once began raging as to whether tea was allowed during a hunger strike or not. Now ours was a hodgepodge combination of people holding allegiance to various ideologies including hardcore Gandhism in which the hunger strike is a potent action of satyagraha and except for water everything else is forbidden. So while the Gandhians insisted that tea could not be taken, others argued that only solid food was prohibited in a hunger strike and tea was allowed.

There seemed to be no signs of either side giving up and the debate went on and on. The tea grew cold but the heat of the debate would not subside. Then suddenly the jail inmate who had brought the tea and then gone away as the debate ensued came back and intervened to say that drinking tea was allowed in a hunger strike. At once those in favour of tea gave a shout of victory and said that even this ordinary jail inmate knew the basic fact that tea was allowed in a hunger strike and so the Gandhians should relent. But the latter were not going to give up so easily and so they asked the jail inmate as to who his source of knowledge was in such a weighty matter. The jail inmate said that he had gone to inform the jailer about the debate going on lest the latter begin suspecting that he was dilly-dallying in his work and on learning of the problem the jailer had told him to inform us that in his opinion drinking of tea was all right in a hunger strike. At this the Gandhians preened themselves, looked at those in favour of drinking tea with contemptuous glances and said that if they wanted to follow the jailer's advice they were welcome to. This finally brought the debate to an end and the tea drinkers had to do without.

One of our friends, who was a died in the red Marxist and had little respect for such Gandhian niceties had poured himself out his glass of tea immediately on its arrival but had had to stay from sipping it due to the debate that was raging. He very reluctantly poured the tea back into the cauldron and barked at the jail inmate to get lost as soon as he could. He later during that stay in jail confided to me that tea and liquor were indispensable for him. He said tongue in cheek that since Marxists being materialists could not fall back on God for seeking solace in times of trouble, they had perforce to rely on things more material like drinks, of the inebriating kind or otherwise, to drown their sorrows, which in the absence of the Indian Revolution were many! But following something akin to Marxist party discipline he had had to bow to the group decision not to take tea, which along with the forced abstinence from liquor meant a great sacrifice for him. I asked him how despite his ideological leanings he had got involved with the environmental movements. He made the most perceptive comment that the CPI in India, unlike the way the CPC had done for Chinese society, had not been able to analyse Indian society properly and had consequently failed to formulate an appropriate mass revolutionary programme of action in the crucial decade of the nineteen thirties. This had contributed to its becoming marginalised with time especially in a highly feudal state like Madhya Pradesh. Fed up with the dead end that the CPI had reached he had resigned from it and begun seeking some action in the environmental movements instead.

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As chance would have it members of both the factions of the Bhopal gas movement were there in the jail with us. They would direct searing glances at each other and keep a distance between themselves. Passing time in jail was a problem and so we would all be talking to each other all the time about various matters. In private conversations with me each of these two groups of activists told me how the other had sabotaged the movement by collaborating with the state. I was young and enthusiastic then and found this kind of backbiting rather disconcerting. But later experience and a little study of history have proved that this kind of splitting of mass political movements is a common feature in India. The Socialists were the first to split in the nineteen fifties, followed by the Communists and then the Congress in the nineteen sixties. The Naxalites one would have thought would have known better but they too succumbed to this retrogressive tendency and outdid everyone else by splitting so profusely that even the amoeba would be put to shame. The first environmental movement in independent India - the Chipko movement, also split after some time. Later the NBA too followed this gory tradition though by then the splitting factions had learnt some lessons and had the sense to keep a joint public face so as to maximise the advantages of the goodwill generated by the movement.

Interestingly an ex-member of the by then moribund Vidushak Karkhana, a farmer and veteran Gandhian grassroots activist from Shahdol, was there with us in the jail on that occasion. He too got into conversation with me and talked bitterly of the way in which the middle class activists had begun having differences with each other and leaving one by one once it became clear that the forces that they were fighting were too tough for them and he alone had been left holding the aborted baby of their much vaunted people's plan. Similarly one member from the defunct Kishore Bharati, which had also split up inter alia because of factional fights was inside with us while another was outside. The one outside was part of the team that used to come every day to talk to us and exchange information. We had chosen a committee of three senior activists from among ourselves, not without causing heartburn among some other seniors who perforce had to be over looked, to act as negotiators and leaders for the duration of our stay in jail and the one inside was one of them. So these two sworn enemies came face to face across the bars of the jail gate and were forced to exchange cordialities every time they met! The one outside later asked me with considerable chagrin after we came out as to how the one inside had wangled his way to glory by managing to go to jail along with us! We were nincompoops he said to have chosen him our leader.

The second serious altercation with regard to the hunger strike arose on the third and final day of our stay. Our supporters outside unaware that we had gone on hunger strike had sent in fruits and very tasty snacks on the second day which were routed to us by the jail administration. These fruits and snacks were given for safekeeping to the negotiating committee of seniors we had chosen so that no one should breach the hunger strike. The committee in turn had secretly decided to keep the tempting foodstuff under the surveillance of a senior leader from the movement against the Indira Sagar Dam at Punasa. Now this gentleman was a Congress politician who had joined the environmental bandwagon just because vast stretches of his lands were slated for submergence by the dam and did not have much faith in Gandhian methods. By the night of the second day this plump amiable person began finding the gnawing in his rotund stomach too much to bear and so he roped in some others of a like disposition and began slyly polishing off the booty entrusted to him.

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This group got bolder still the next morning and began inviting others into their small circle. However, in their bid to gain more legitimacy by recruiting as many people as was possible they made the mistake of offering some bananas to one of the younger lot of activists. This activist was dressed in jeans and tee shirt unlike the rest of us young firebrands who were in pajamas and kurtas and so had seemed to the eaters to be amenable to their tempting. But he too was a hardcore Gandhian as far as maintaining the sanctity of political actions went and he rose up in righteous indignation berating the eaters for having sullied the reputation of the whole group and roundly denounced them in front of everyone. There was a furore and once again a verbal tussle ensued with our Marxist friend, who, to do him justice, had refused the food offered him but had not squealed on the eaters, castigating the decision to go on hunger strike just because Medha had done so as an arbitrary and wholly spiritualist act. Things might have got out of hand with some people heated up enough to be on the verge of exchanging blows when the jailer came to announce that we were to be released. He was greeted with raucous slogan shouting and soon we were crowding out of our barracks in a happy mood!

My friend Jacob Nellithanam and I had put down our home addresses as that of Anandwan in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, where Baba Amte resides, when we had been put into the jail. The rule is that when a prisoner is released the jail authorities should provide him with travel fare to his place of residence. Normal prisoners are too ignorant or timid to demand this but we were political prisoners so we would get this benefit. Jacob and I had planned beforehand that we were to go to meet Baba Amte after our caper in jail and being short of funds as we mostly were in those heady days, had hit on this stratagem to go there on government money. So after taking leave of our co-prisoners we made a beeline for the railway station and then had a good filling non-vegetarian meal. So much for Gandhian political action! The events of those three days in jail, in which almost all the leading lights of the environmental mass movements of the country were together, on later reflection, seem to me to have borne the seeds of the present marginalisation of these movements. We are so many different people pulling the whipping stick in so many different anarchistic directions that there seems little chance of our being able to churn up the immortal nectar of a sustainable future from the sea of destructive development around us as the Gods had done in Hindu mythology.

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