

Chapter 18 - Reliving the Myth of Sisyphus

The NBA in the meanwhile, in the same way as the adivasi mass organisations in its vicinity, had had some mountain top experiences and like them it too had invariably come crashing down to earth with a thud every time. We all found ourselves in the same accursed nether regions as the mythical Greek hero Sisyphus. Greek legend has it that the king of Corinth, Sisyphus, was cursed by the Gods to continually roll a heavy rock up a mountain in hell only to see it roll down again because of his scornful attitude towards them. Among other things when Pluto abducted the daughter of Esopus the latter came to Sisyphus for help. Sisyphus agreed to help Esopus recover his daughter if the latter would promise to give water to the citadel at Corinth. Thus in exchange for water for his people Sisyphus bore the wrath of the Gods much in the same way as the environmental mass movements have borne the wrath of the false Gods of modern development for ensuring a more sustainable and decentralised water resource plan for the country.

The NBA soon began countering the setback suffered following the failure of the Sangharsh Yatra in 1991 and the repression of the BJP government in terms of a decrease in the oustee mass base through a greater reliance on lobbying and advocacy. To make up for the lack of a strong and numerous mass base in the valley, the NBA went about with gusto cultivating a wide base among urbanites the world over. Initially this kind of support was successful to a certain extent in that the independent review commissioned by the World Bank poked a myriad holes into the way the SSP had been designed and was being implemented and recommended that the project be stopped. The massive international lobbying carried out on the basis of this eventually forced the World Bank to pressurise the Indian Government into saying that it would not avail of the remaining tranches of the loan for the SSP. Consequently the Japanese government too withdrew the loan it was going to offer for the purchase of the electricity generating turbines from Japan.

The euphoria created by the withdrawal of the World Bank was short lived as we have seen because the Gujarat government proceeded with the work on the dam with its own resources and also those garnered from the public issue of a debt bond. But more importantly the World Bank withdrawal came only in 1993 and something had to be done to stop the dam immediately after the Sangharsh Yatra. So a strategy was worked out wherein a special kind of mass action was undertaken, which, since the people who participated in these were not in sufficient numbers, was used as a symbolic peg on which the thrust of advocacy was hung. This was the "Manibeli Satyagraha". With the height of the dam being raised continuously the villages behind it gradually began to be submerged and as a result land in the first village in Maharashtra, Manibeli, was to be submerged in the monsoon season of 1991. So Medha led a motley crew of adivasis, Nimari peasants and urbanites from across the country and the world into staging a satyagraha in a hut called "Narmadai" specially built for the purpose in Manibeli waiting for the waters of the Narmada to come and engulf them. Despite heavy police presence the satyagraha was conducted well with people coming and going in batches from the entire valley to keep Narmadai inhabited at all times. The whole operation was a grand success in publicity terms, the waters in the monsoons came only upto fifteen feet of the hut, and so the actual test of drowning did not occur.

After the monsoons the construction work of the dam once again began and so by the time of the next monsoons in 1992 it was clear that the Narmadai hut would be drowned. All the people of Manibeli were not with the NBA. Some of the people had

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resettled in Gujarat earlier and the government with heavy police presence decided to move out their houses and belongings to their resettlement site in March 1992. The police used this as a pretext to attack the supporters of the NBA sitting in the Narmadai hut and a series of skirmishes ensued in which upwards of two hundred people were jailed and the hut itself was demolished. This repression continued throughout the monsoons as a police picket was posted in Manibeli to ensure that the hut was not rebuilt at the same place as before. So it had to be built higher up. People, even children from Anjanbara village who had gone to put in a vigil at the newly constructed hut, were continually arrested by the police and sent to jail. Many supporters from outside the valley too bore imprisonment in solidarity with the people in the valley.

All this, however, had no impact on the government and after the monsoons once again the work on the dam proceeded as before. Medha along with an oustee from Nimar, Devarambhai, launched a hunger strike in June 1993 in Mumbai, armed with the moral authority of the critical report of the Morse Committee, demanding that the work on the dam be stopped and a full review of the SSP be undertaken. After fourteen days the Union Water Resources Minister agreed to a comprehensive review of the dam by an independent committee of experts but not the stoppage of the work on the dam. The hunger strike was withdrawn on this agreement. The monsoon floods began in July 1993 and the houses in Manibeli began to be submerged. The villagers stayed put in their huts in a valiant demonstration of resilience, braving the rising waters and not fleeing like rats as the government had thought they would. After all this is what Subhadra's parents had done and also the oustees of the many other dams that had been built earlier. Then the police forcibly removed them to tin sheds that had been built higher up for the purpose. The swirling waters of the Narmada engulfed the huts and all their belongings. Vitthalbhai of Manibeli bravely declared that he did not consider this to be a loss at all. He said he would think that he had given alms to the government as he would to a beggar (Sangwai, 2002).

The intransigence of the Gujarat Government and the bureaucracy in the Union Water Resources Ministry had meant that no concrete steps had been taken to begin work on the promised review of the SSP. This and the submergence of the villages of Manibeli and Bamni forced the NBA to announce that Medha along with other activists and villagers would commit "Jal Samarpan" or drown themselves in the Narmada if the review was not undertaken. Medha had by then become a cult figure and was at the peak of her popularity. About this time, once, I was travelling in a local train, when our co-passengers began talking about the state of governance in our country. They were lamenting the lack of integrity and sensitivity to the needs of the masses among the leaders of the mainstream political parties as well as the bureaucracy. Then one of them said that what the country needed was more Medha Patkars. Every one concurred saying that here was a lady who had courageously taken on the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats and if only she had more people to support her then things would change for the better in India. Throughout the country and abroad there were many people who felt the same. So there was general concern about her well being given her professed resolve to drown herself in the Narmada. Police was deployed in large numbers along the Maharashtra and Gujarat sides of the river to ensure that Medha did not commit Jal Samarpan.

Medha Patkar went underground and declared that she would jump into the river at any location that proved suitable unless the dam construction was stopped. Parliament was in session at the time and this announcement created a furore there with many members demanding that the government do something. The Government decided in August 1993 to

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finally constitute a team of five independent experts to review the SSP but no firm assurances were given about the work on the dam being stopped. Medha withdrew her Jal Samarpan threat on the announcement of the constitution of the review committee and came out into the open in Gujarat where she was arrested. The Gujarat Government refused to cooperate with this review committee, as was only to be expected and after the monsoons once again resumed construction of the dam even while the review process was under way. So after this in November 1994 a dharna was organised in Bhopal to pressurise the Madhya Pradesh Government to withdraw from the SSP and demand that it be scrapped. Here too Medha went on a hunger strike along with some other oustees when there were no signs of this demand being met. When the condition of Medha began to get serious after three weeks, the police in a pre dawn swoop arrested all the hunger strikers and took them to hospital where they were forcibly put on intravenous drips.

Seeing little possibility of the dam being stopped through symbolic mass actions and lobbying alone the NBA had in the mean time taken recourse to legal action and approached the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Supreme Court of India in May 1994. Both of them took cognisance of the issues raised by the NBA and issued notices to the concerned governments. Since it was not legally possible to continue proceedings in both forums simultaneously the petition to the NHRC was later withdrawn. The Supreme Court after hearing out all the parties decided to review the facts and arguments on the basis of which the SSP was being constructed on December 13th 1994 the day on which Medha and her co-hunger strikers were arrested in Bhopal. Taking a cue from the Supreme Court the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh announced on the 16th of December that his government would also review its support to the SSP and on this assurance Medha and her colleagues withdrew their hunger strike. Later the Supreme Court ordered a stay on the construction of the dam in May 1995 pending the disposal of the case thus bringing some relief to the NBA as far as the battle against the SSP was concerned. This was the highest point reached by the NBA in its struggle to save the Narmada valley.

The tenacious struggle against the SSP succeeded in igniting many more such struggles all along the valley. Things began hotting up in 1992, upstream near Jabalpur, where the Bargi dam had been completed and the gates closed in 1990, submerging some one hundred and sixty odd villages. Once again there had not been anything like adequate provisions for the rehabilitation of the people with many of the poor oustees having to migrate to Jabalpur and pull rickshaws there for a livelihood. So an agitation started there too. The immediate fallout was that the "Bargi Baandh Visthapit evam Prabhavit Sangh", the organisation of the oustees was given the fishing rights to the reservoir, which had been appropriated by the government and the contractors. Later the adivasi oustees of the Tawa dam constructed in the nineteen eighties on the River Tawa, a tributary of the Narmada, also began agitating under the aegis of the Kisan Adivasi Sangathan and got this right after the usual police beatings and stints in jail. These federations of oustees have managed the fishing activities in these reservoirs so well that they have become profitable both for them and for the government. Fish is now supplied from these reservoirs to far off places like Kolkata. This has been achieved despite opposition from the vested interests among the erstwhile fishing contractors and the bureaucracy.

However, the more important demand of being given land in place of the land lost due to submergence was not acceded to by the government despite a few long hunger strikes and Jal Samarpan campaigns. As always the government would give some assurances and then take recourse to repressive measures to break the agitation and renege on the

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assurances made. Similarly movements against the construction of the dams on the tributaries of Man and Veda too have met with repression and false assurances to break hunger strikes that were undertaken and the oustees have been deprived of the elusive right of rehabilitation with land in place of the land lost due to submergence.

The Supreme Court finally disposed of the case against the SSP in 1998 saying that the dam should go on but adequate steps should be taken for the proper rehabilitation of the oustees according to the NWDT provisions and lifted the stay on its construction. This put things back to square one and completely deflated the NBA's balloon of unrealistic expectations regarding the possibility of a complete cancellation of the dam by the apex court. Not only were the political forces in support of the dam much stronger than the NBA but there were very few takers for the NBA plea that the dam would prove a disaster in the future and so it should be scrapped. The NBA was forced to fall back on the rather less effective Jal Samarpan actions to try and stop the dam. This was the time when Arundhati Roy jumped into the fray and pumped some adrenalin into the NBA's veins for this renewed battle. However, this was not enough and so the SSP has continued to be built submerging an ever-larger number of villages by the year.

The only saving grace for some time was that due to the Supreme Court's stipulation that before the height of the dam is increased beyond a certain level the oustees upto that level should be properly rehabilitated, the NBA got a chance to delay the construction of the dam by bringing the matter of non-rehabilitation up before it from time to time in the form of contempt petitions. However, the basic problem was that there was no cheap agricultural land of good quality available anymore either in Gujarat, Maharashtra or Madhya Pradesh. If the oustees were to be given good agricultural land in accordance with the provision of the NWDT then the costs of the project would shoot up astronomically. So the Madhya Pradesh Government, which had to provide for most of the oustees tried to palm them off with monetary compensation. The NBA protested but to no avail and the Narmada Control Authority gave the go ahead for further construction of the dam in 2006. Medha went on a hunger strike once again in Delhi along with a few other oustees and supporters. Once again with her health deteriorating she was arrested and hospitalised. When the executive refused to do anything concrete then the NBA approached the Supreme Court and Medha broke her hunger strike. However, the Supreme Court this time refused to stay the construction and decided to take the easy way out provided by its earlier judgment in which it had said that further disputes in the matter should not be brought before it again but referred to the Prime Minister for resolution and threw the hot ball back into the government's frying pan. Given the tremendous pressure created in Gujarat with the Chief Minister going on a hunger strike and massive mass rallies organised by all political parties in support of the dam the NBA has finally lost out.

The numbers game is just not in favour of the NBA. Most of the oustees in Madhya Pradesh are taking what they can get in cash compensation from the government and clearing out. It is only a few hundred diehard NBA members from the valley who are still fighting with the support from some of the urban intelligentsia across the country and around the world. That is why the Narmada valley has been dammed with impunity and the other dams also have either been completed or work is progressing apace on them. The work on the Indira Sagar dam near Punasa too began after this in 2000 with the formation of a company, Narmada Hydroelectric Development Corporation (NHDC), as a joint venture between the Government of Madhya Pradesh and an undertaking of the Government of India, National Hydro-Electric Power Corporation. Later the NHDC also began work on the

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Omkareshwar dam downstream of the ISP. The contract for the actual construction of these dams went to the same Jayaprakash Associates that has been building the SSP. The state adopted a vigorous policy of distribution of cash compensation to the influential landed people and so the initial mobilisation that had been there at the time of the Harsud rally in 1989 soon dissipated and the dam was completed in 2004. This has led to the submergence of the very town where fifteen years earlier we had all gathered in such large numbers and pledged in right earnest to stop destructive development. This is a telling reminder of the weakness of mass environmental movements in this country, even of one with such a wide national and international support base as the NBA, when confronted with the intransigence of the state. As usual rehabilitation has not been properly done and the people were forced to tear down their houses and leave literally at gunpoint (IPC, 2004). The NBA has tried to salvage something for the oustees to get them at least decent cash compensation of which the government has tried to cheat them. Rallies were taken out in Khandwa town in Madhya Pradesh against the government's apathetic treatment of the oustees and finally a petition has been filed in the High Court in Jabalpur for their proper rehabilitation.

Temporarily the movement to stop the construction of the Maheshwar dam on the River Narmada in between the dams at Omkareshwar and Navagam had been successful for some time. This was primarily because this dam is being built by a private company, which does not have enough finances and technical competency of its own. Initially the government sought to bulldoze the movement against the dam into submission through repressive measures and for a time it did succeed. However, the tremendous international support base that the NBA has built up is so powerful that it has succeeded in stalling international funding and technical support for the dam. But now the work on the dam has started once again as the company has managed to tie up fund agreements with Indian financial institutions. The NBA has begun agitating against this but there is every likelihood of the government resorting to renewed bouts of repression to bulldoze its way through to building the dam.

What price satyagraha then as an action strategy for bringing the modern state to heel. Satyagraha has some chance of succeeding in crunch situations only when those practising it are in very large numbers and so convinced about their cause and the philosophy of Gandhism as to be able to exert moral pressure and bring about a change of heart in the oppressor. The Gandhian philosophy relies heavily on Hindu ascetism and mysticism as we have seen, and is far removed from the lives of common everyday people and even more so from that of the Bhil adivasis. Arundhati Roy, who has pitched in lyrically in support of hedonism in her Booker Prize winning novel "The God of Small Things" (Roy, 1998), has admitted in the monograph 'Greater Common Good' that the theory and practice of Gandhism requires a very strong moral fibre, especially when it comes to renouncing sex and shopping, which most ordinary mortals cannot do without (Roy, 1999). Significantly Gandhi himself wrote in the course of the freedom struggle that, whatever his personal anarchistic beliefs, at the societal level he was not trying to establish the kind of village self rule he had advocated in Hind Swaraj but was fighting for the more practical goal of establishing parliamentary self rule only (Gandhi, 1921).

So even during India's freedom movement when there was such a groundswell of mass protest against the British, Gandhians could rarely achieve their immediate demands let alone win the jackpot of freedom through satyagraha in general and the hunger strike in particular. Of the many hunger strikes before independence the most famous instance of such an action ending in the death of the faster was that of Jatindranath Das who was

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ironically not a Gandhian but a bomb making expert who had been jailed for armed militancy against the British along with the great martyr Bhagat Singh for their part in the Lahore bomb conspiracy of 1928. He had demanded along with Bhagat Singh that they be recognised as political prisoners and better facilities be provided in Lahore jail to the prisoners. His demands were not met and he died after sixty-three days of fasting in 1929 (Gupta & Gupta, 2001). Das's death resulted in a massive hue and cry and the British had to constitute an enquiry team. The team found a lot of lacunae in the jail administration and suggested reforms, which were then undertaken. But this was a small demand compared to the demand for independence, which was finally gained only after the burgeoning mass struggles during and after World War II brought home to the British the realisation that it would be far wiser to hand over power in a smooth transition to a capitalist and feudal elite led by Nehru within the colonial constitutional framework that the British themselves had prepared. So they did not hold on to power for long after the World War ended and risk it being seized by a more radical and militant formation of the masses with possible help from Soviet Russia as later happened in neighbouring China. Indeed if it had not been for the Hindu - Muslim showdown and the consequent need for the partition of the Indian sub-continent independence would have been achieved even earlier in 1946 itself.

The only time Gandhi himself did in fact succeed to some extent with a fast was in rather controversial circumstances in 1932 over his standoff with Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar against the proposal for separate electorates for the untouchable dalit castes. Ambedkar, who had himself had to bear virulent upper caste discrimination throughout his childhood and youth when he was trying to educate himself, felt that traditional Hindu caste society, especially in rural areas, was deeply biased against the untouchables and the latter would not be allowed to vote by the former. So when the British, in a bid to fragment the unity of the freedom movement, proposed separate electorates for all possible sections of society for election to the provincial and central assemblies as part of the process of devolution of powers through a new act, Ambedkar was quick to take this opportunity to press for separate electorates for the dalits also. Ambedkar suggested the delineation of separate electorates of the untouchables who would vote for untouchable candidates. Gandhi who was in Yeravda jail near Pune at that time immediately launched into a fast unto death against this so called "Communal Award". Pressure was brought to bear on Ambedkar and eventually a compromise was reached known as the "Poona Pact" under which seats were reserved for the dalits but they did not get separate electorates (Rajasekhariah, 1989). Incidentally the Muslims under Jinnah held fast to their ground and got both separate electorates and separate candidates. Thus satyagraha worked only with Ambedkar whose heart was amenable to change and not with the British or the Muslims whose were not. Indeed the saga of dalits not voting continues to this day as there are sections of dalits in some parts of this country who are still not allowed to vote by the upper castes.

Immediately after independence the burning question, after all the princely states had either acceded or had been forcibly integrated into the Indian Union, was that of the formation of states based on linguistic sub-nationalities. Nehru was in favour of a strong central government that could push through his modern temple building, riding roughshod over local opposition. He was thus opposed to the formation of such states that would in the end give rise to regional power centres that would weaken the authority of the Union Government as is the case at present. Telegu nationalist aspirations were, however, very strong and a mass movement soon began for a separate state of Andhra Pradesh to be carved out from the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad and the Madras Presidency area. Nehru was adamant in his refusal to accede to this demand. Then a leader of the Andhra

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movement, Poti Sri Ramulu, began a fast unto death in November 1952. Nehru following the practice of the British ignored this and allowed Sri Ramulu to fast to death on December 15th 1952. All hell broke loose after this in the Telugu speaking areas as the masses came onto the streets and eventually Nehru had to backtrack and the state of Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1953 (Rao, 1988). This is one rare instance in which the determination of the hunger striker to bear death and the tremendous mass support for his demand has been able to bend the obduracy of the state apparatus.

Master Tara Singh a venerable Sikh leader and one of the founders of the Sikh political party, Akali Dal, also launched a hunger strike in 1961 to press for the formation of the separate Sikh majority state of Punjab to be carved out from the Patiala and East Punjab States Union. Unfortunately he broke his fast after forty odd days on a vague assurance given by Nehru to look into the matter and so did not achieve his goal. The withdrawal of the hunger strike led to Master Tara Singh losing his leadership of the Akalis who eventually achieved their demand in 1967 after some further agitations at a time when other such linguistic states had already been created (Singh, 1967). Thus the success of a hunger strike in securing an important and radical demand hinges crucially on the hunger striker going on to bear death and the demand being supported by a substantial and organised mass base. Such a mass base was never possible given the serpent like geographical spread of the affected people and the worldview of most of them, which is vastly different from that of Gandhi. So the NBA has not met the conditions for success of Gandhian political action in the numerous hunger strikes and jal samarpan andolans that it has staged. Consequently Khemla's prophecy has come true a decade after he made it and it is the River Narmada instead which is facing death by indiscriminate damming.

The biggest mass upheaval against the state in independent India to date was that started by Jayaprakash Narayan in the state of Gujarat in 1974 in the form of the Navnirman Andolan, which later spread to the state of Bihar and became the Sampurna Kranti Andolan (Rammoorthy, 1999). These movements were against the corruption of elected Congress governments and their negligence of the needs of the poor people at a time when the Indian economy was going through a phase of high inflation and low growth. They had tremendous participation from the youth. The movement in Gujarat was so strong that the state government had to be dissolved and a similar demand was being made in Bihar too. In early 1975 Morarjee Desai, a veteran Congressman who had later fallen out with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and stayed with the old guard when the Congress party split in 1969, launched into a fast unto death demanding the holding of fresh elections in Gujarat where the assembly had been dissolved. Finally after seventeen days Indira Gandhi agreed to the demand because the Nav Nirman Andolan had assumed mass proportions and threatened to become violent. However, she remained adamant about not dissolving the Bihar assembly and ordering a fresh election there too. The movement in Bihar in the meanwhile had assumed such strength that it had been able to withstand all repression and brought governance there to a standstill. Jayaprakash Narayan began touring the whole country to build up opinion against the governance of the Congress party and got quite a response from the people of the Northern Indian states. Jayaprakash Narayan even went to the extent of publicly exhorting the army and police personnel to listen to their inner voice and refuse to act on illegal orders that may be given to them by the government to crush the burgeoning mass movement. A harking back perhaps to his early communist training in which he must have learnt that the liberal democratic state always throws away the fig leaf of legality that it wears when its foundations are challenged by mass upheavals against its iniquities.

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Then in early June 1975 the Allahabad High Court in the state of Uttar Pradesh pronounced a far-reaching judgment setting aside the election of Indira Gandhi to the Lok Sabha from the Rae Bareilly constituency in 1971 on technical grounds. A veteran socialist who had fought and lost against her, Raj Narain, had filed a petition in the High Court earlier in which this order was passed. Immediately the opposition parties began demanding that Indira Gandhi resign as Prime Minister on moral grounds. A massive public meeting was organised in New Delhi on June 25th led by Jayaprakash Narayan to press for Indira Gandhi's resignation and for the dissolution of the Bihar assembly. That evening internal emergency was declared stating that there was a serious threat to the continuance of democracy in the country and all civil liberties stood curtailed. In nightlong police swoops all over the country thousands of leaders and workers of opposition parties and political movements were arrested including Jayaprakash Narayan. The Bihar movement was crushed and nineteen months of dictatorial rule followed all over the country after this before the emergency was lifted and elections announced again in January 1977.

Thus state power had once again prevailed over satyagraha despite the biggest ever mass popular mobilisation in the post independence era. Since the mobilisation of the NBA or all the other environmental mass movements has not achieved even a small percentage of this historic level of mobilisation it is not surprising that these movements have not been able to withstand state repression and impact upon state policies in any significant manner. In recent years the mass popular mobilisations in Manipur have hit the headlines. These mobilisations were against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA). This statute had been enacted to deal with the armed secessionist militancy in the Northeastern states and gives draconian powers to the armed forces to detain and even kill people that they arrest without any due process of law. These mobilisations because of their strength have achieved some success and a review of the AFSPA is in progress by a committee headed by a retired Supreme Court Judge but there is little likelihood of the act being scrapped altogether. Here too a young lady Sharmila Irom went on a hunger strike from November 2nd 2000 demanding the repeal of the AFSPA (CRAFSPA, 2005). She was arrested under the charge of attempting to commit suicide and is being kept alive since in solitary confinement through intravenous drips. Once again the character of the state that is revealed is that of being an iron-souled one not at all amenable to the change of heart that is proposed to be brought about by satyagraha.

Ironically the most successful application of mass satyagraha in the post Gandhian era has not been in India but in the United States of America under the charismatic leadership of Martin Luther King (Davidson, 1991). He gave a new mass orientation to the Civil Rights Movement for equal treatment and opportunities for the blacks in the southern states, who were living as second-class citizens. Within the space of just five years between 1958 and 1963 he was able to remove the legal sanction for discrimination against blacks that had been there in the southern states and also get recognition for the policy of affirmative action in the provision of government jobs and education benefits to the Blacks. He became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace at the age of thirty-five in 1964. He then began to get involved in the other serious and far more difficult issues of exploitation and poverty and also the movement against the war in Vietnam but was assassinated in 1968. Despite his meteoric success it must be remembered that he was not fighting a monolithic state apparatus united against his demands but one that was divided between the whites of the north and south with regard to the policy towards Blacks. Thus the whites of the northern states supported King's movement and ultimately the Supreme Court held the racist discriminatory legislations of southern states to be unconstitutional.

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King's famous dream of removing poverty and exploitation of the blacks has proved a more difficult proposition and today the blacks, despite constituting thirteen per cent of the population, have only eight per cent representation in the United States Congress while comprising a whopping fifty percent of the prison inmates (Trice, 2005, Parkin, 2002).

In this context one can't help wondering in awe at the tremendous achievement of Babasaheb Ambedkar in his battle over a more or less similar issue in which he almost single-handedly achieved much more for the dalits in this country without having the same kind of mass support as that of King or Gandhi. He was steeped in the liberal democratic tradition but was at the same time aware that in reality parliamentary democracy in India is only a top dressing over the main course, which is essentially undemocratic. So his exhortation to the dalits was to "educate, organise and agitate". Unfortunately the dalits have not been able to build on this inspiring legacy and posit a concerted united challenge to the domination of the upper castes in independent India. Some hopes were raised in the nineteen eighties when the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was formed. Calling the casteist Hindu society "Manuvadi" because it followed the discriminatory prescriptions of the ancient Indian lawgiver Manu, the BSP called for a total rejection of the domination by the miniscule upper castes. However, the corrupt dynamics of electoral politics in India soon overwhelmed them and they have now lost their radical cutting edge.

Another serious problem in the practice of mass satyagraha is that it frequently gets caught in a pincers between the violence of the state and the spontaneous retaliatory violence of the agitating masses. The difficult Gandhian tenets are rarely followed by the masses in such situations and in the absence of a well thought out alternative practice the energy of the masses gets dissipated by state repression. The most famous example is that of the Chauri Chaura incident of 1922 during the Non-Cooperation Movement (Ghosh, 1989). Gandhi after coming back to India from South Africa had slowly made his way up to the leadership of the freedom struggle through the partial resolution of problems faced by people in the Champaran movement of 1918, The Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 and the Ahmedabad mill workers' strike also in 1918 by the use of satyagraha (Dhanagare, 1983). At that time there were only the militant nationalists who believed in individual violent actions and the staid leadership of the Congress party, which believed in just petitioning the British. Thus Gandhi introduced the crucial element of organised mass participation on a national scale, which had been lacking up to then in the freedom struggle. Gandhi brought the Congress round to his point of view and the Non-Cooperation Movement was launched in September 1920 demanding Swaraj or self-rule along Gandhian non-violent lines. This was at a time when the British funding of their World War I campaign through increased extortion and forced donations from the peasant masses had left the latter in desperate straits. The horrendous Jalianwalabagh massacre of hundreds of unarmed protestors in Punjab in 1919 during the earlier satyagraha against the draconian Rowlatt Act had further angered the people all over the country. There was an immediate nationwide response to the call for non-cooperation and people began boycotting British cloth, and courts and defaulting on land rents and taxes. The British responded by the usual means of police repression only to make matters worse for the masses.

Some volunteers from Chauri and Chaura villages near Gorakhpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh began picketting liquor and cloth shops at the local market on 1st February 1922. The police abused them and gave them a good thrashing. On 4th February thousands of villagers launched a demonstration in front of the Chaura Police Station protesting against this illegal action. They were leaving after holding a meeting when the police once

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again roughed up some of the people in the rear. This led to the crowd of people gathering again in front of the Police Station. The police opened fire on them and killed three of the people. This angered the crowd and it rushed the police who retreated into the Police Station. The crowd then set fire to the Police Station killing all twenty-two policemen inside. Similarly in 1942 after the announcement of the Quit India Movement all the prominent leaders including Gandhi were immediately put into jail but the masses, who had been suffering the depredations of the British because they were once again extorting heavy taxes and land rent to fund their World War II military campaign, broke out in spontaneous violent outbursts all over the country. Particularly glorious were the battles fought spontaneously by the rural masses of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. To quell this uprising the British had to divert bomber squadrons and battalions of the army from the war front (Ghosh, 1995). The author Rahi Masoom Raza has written, in what is probably the greatest novel in Hindi in independent India - "Aadha Gaon", a hair raising account of villagers attacking a police station during this period in Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Raza, 1998).

The history of the NBA too corroborates this. Even though the NBA has worked within the Gandhian framework, time and again the adivasis, who have an enviable martial tradition, have broken out in spontaneous violence in response to the illegal violence of the state. Whether it was the violence of the villagers of Anjanbara in 1993 or later that of the villagers of Nimgavan, Sikka and Surung in Maharashtra in the same year which resulted in the death of the only martyr of the NBA, Rehmal Punia Vasava, in police firing, these were all instances of the people fighting in their own idiom disregarding the directions of their leaders. The state in such cases then responds with even greater repression and crushes the movement altogether. The Gandhian framework does not allow for the possibility of such violence and so does not have any strategy to use this energy constructively and instead prescribes that a movement that has become violent must be withdrawn totally. The legal monopoly over violence that the state has is used most effectively by it to crush protest movements against injustice being perpetrated by oppressors in search of economic gain. Under the circumstances there is bound to be spontaneous counter violence of the oppressed. The Marxists have, consequently posited that this spontaneous counter violence should be channelised into a systematic armed struggle but as we shall see later this too has proved unsuccessful in the long run. The problem of whether to use violence or not in political action thus remains unresolved to this day.

When we started political mobilisations in the Katkut area we tried to prepare the people for this inevitability of the use of illegal violence by the state. Thus the people were much more consciously resilient to this violence and not given to responding spontaneously with counter violence. However, since the mobilisation was spread over only about twenty villages it did not have even a miniscule amount of the huge mass mobilisation needed to challenge the state in any significant way. So in the end we found ourselves in a similar cul-de-sac as the NBA despite our conscious appreciation of the might of the modern Indian state and the inadequacies of satyagraha as a means of countering it. Indeed it has been the fate of almost all environmental mass movements in this country, beginning with the Chipko movement of the nineteen seventies, that they have been agitating in isolation around issues that concern only a very small number of people directly affected by some project or environmental disaster and so are incapable of building up substantial mass bases that can challenge the destructive development policies at a national or global level.

Sisyphus was such a daredevil that on one occasion he even kidnapped the God of Death and kept him chained in his palace. Pluto had to send the God of War to free him. We

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in the environmental mass movements in India too have been trying to chain the God of Ecological Death and like Pluto the high priests of the God of Modern Development have continually sent their God of War to stymie us. It looks as if we are similarly doomed to eternally rolling the rock of mass mobilisation up against the mountain of state obduracy only to see it go crashing down time and again. What can be more punishing than such futile and hopeless labour? But according to the French philosopher, author and Nobel laureate Albert Camus, Sisyphus is in fact at his glorious best when he is back at the foot of the mountain because then he is not bemoaning his fate but pondering over its inevitability given his rebelliousness against the Gods (Camus, 1955). He accepts his fate and decides to defeat the Gods by enjoying the struggle as he endlessly rolls the rock up the mountain regardless of the failure to keep it up there permanently. Thus seemingly intractable ideological and practical problems notwithstanding Medha Patkar and the NBA deserve laurels for having led from the front in keeping the rock of environmental mass movements rolling in this country and so inspiring many people to spurn the God of Modern Development and continue to relive the myth of Sisyphus.

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