

Chapter 9 - Once Turbulent Flowed the Narmada

There used to be a place in Sirkhiri village on the banks of the Narmada in Alirajpur tehsil, before it got submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam, where the river used to flow through a gorge that was just twenty metres or so wide between 30 metre high escarpments on both sides. The adivasis had a beautiful name for it - Helkaria. Easily the most majestic sight I have witnessed of the might of mother nature is that of the river in spate during the monsoons thundering through this gorge, the water tossing up in huge scary waves as it buffeted from escarpment to escarpment. A turbulent image that could humble even the most arrogant of persons. That is how the place got its Bhili name Helkaria meaning tossing from side to side. Today all is calm signifying that this mighty river has been tamed. But for about a decade from the late nineteen eighties to the late nineteen nineties the NBA fought hard to retain the Narmada's pristine glory in a struggle that despite its later inevitable dissipation has created many landmarks in the history of mass environmentalism in this country and worldwide.

When I first came to Alirajpur the construction of the main part of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the riverbed was in limbo held up by the lack of a clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests of the Government of India. Indeed the whole history of the dam is replete with delays due to such bizarre happenings that it can verily be said that too many engineering cooks spoil the natural broth of a river. When Nehru, the obsessive modern temple builder, laid the foundation stone of the dam in 1961 at Navagam in the state of Gujarat the plan was to build the dam in two stages. The first stage was to have a Full Reservoir Level of 162 feet that would submerge only villages in the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra but not those upstream in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Paranjpye, 1990). However, later, prodded on by its engineers, the Gujarat Government envisioned a much more grandiose dam with a Full Reservoir Level of 425 feet that would enable it to utilise the flows of the river more fully and irrigate dry areas as far as Kutch in the north of Gujarat. But this increase in the height of the Navagam dam, as it was known at the time, meant that it would affect the operation of a dam that the Madhya Pradesh Government proposed to build at Jalsindhi and also submerge villages and land in Madhya Pradesh. Urged on by the engineers on both sides disputes arose between the two states and to resolve these the Central Government constituted an expert committee, which was directed to take the whole Narmada basin into consideration for deciding on the structures required to utilise its waters. This committee submitted its report in 1965 suggesting the construction of a number of dams on the river and its tributaries and giving their tentative heights including the one at Navagam. While the Gujarat Government accepted the committee's recommendations the Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra Governments, once again at the behest of their engineers, did not. There were many parleys and meetings for two years after this but the differences could not be resolved. Ultimately in 1968 the Gujarat Government invoked the provisions of the Inter-State Water Disputes Act 1956 and moved the Government of India to appoint a tribunal to resolve matters. In the meantime the state of Rajasthan, not to be left out of the sweepstakes, had also staked a claim to the waters of the Narmada even though it was not a basin state. So in 1969 The Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) was constituted to go into all the contentions of the four states regarding the use of the waters of the Narmada.

The NWDT came out with an initial order in 1971 in which it fixed the utilisable flow of the river at seventy five per cent dependability to be 22.22 million acre-feet and directed that it should be apportioned between the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh while the state of Rajasthan not being a basin state should not get any benefits. The

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

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

Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh Governments were dissatisfied with this judgment on various counts and so they moved the Supreme Court against it and got the proceedings of the NWDT stayed. Once again parleys and meetings began and finally in 1974 an agreement was reached that the utilisable flow in the Narmada at seventy five per cent dependability would be 28 million acre-feet of which Maharashtra would get 0.5 million acre-feet and Rajasthan 0.25 million acre-feet. The NWDT would have to decide on the allocation of the remaining 27.25 million acre-feet between Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, the height of the Navagam dam in Gujarat and the height of the irrigation off take canal. After much bickering for nearly four years, mainly arising from the fact that the states inflated their claims regarding the irrigation and power benefits that should accrue to them and deflated the costs that they would have to bear, the NWDT came out with its final award in 1978. Gujarat was apportioned 9 million acre-feet of the flow while Madhya Pradesh got the remaining 18.25. The height of the Navagam dam, which had by then come to be named the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) was fixed at 455 feet and the height of the off take canal at 300 feet. The costs and benefits of the power to be generated also were apportioned between the three states.

In a peculiar topsy-turvy denouement this resulted in the planning of the use of Narmada waters having to be done from downstream upwards instead of vice versa, as environmental logic would have suggested. The height of 455 feet for the SSP had to be fixed to allow Gujarat to draw its allotment of 9 million acre-feet of water. Since the reservoir to be created by the SSP was not capable of storing the whole of this water another mega dam, 860 feet in height, was planned upstream at Punasa, which later came to be called the Indira Sagar Project (ISP). This dam, which has now been completed, has the biggest reservoir in the country. Water was to be released from this dam and then stored in between in two more dams at Omkareshwar and Maheshwar on its way to the SSP. Another dam was to be built at Bargi to take advantage of the flow upstream of the Punasa dam. The heights of all these other dams were also calculated so as to be able to use the 18.25 million acre-feet that had been allotted to Madhya Pradesh. In reality the estimation of the flow of a river is a dicey game based on the river run-off that is recorded every year at various measuring stations on the river. Different experts generally come out with different estimates based on the same set of data. This is what has happened with the Narmada also. The value of 28 million acre-feet finally decided on in 1974 was more a political decision than a technical one. Current estimates put the actual flow at seventy five per cent dependability at 22.69 million acre-feet, which is closer to the value that the NWDT had arrived at in 1971. The extra flow value was necessitated to accommodate the exaggerated irrigation and power demands that were projected by the engineers involved and has led to an over design of all the dams. The Bhakra dam on the river Sutlej in Himachal Pradesh, another and perhaps the most famous of Nehru's modern temples, also suffers from a similar over design as in that case there were not just the states within the country that were quarrelling but the two nations of India and Pakistan (Dharmadhikary, 2005). Invariably this kind of over design based on inflated demands for the waters of a river, more than its actual available flow, leads on later to more disputes between states as has now become rampant between Punjab, Delhi and Haryana over the waters of the Jamuna, Sutlej, Ravi and Beas rivers and between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the waters of the Cauvery river. One can thus safely assume that the same fate will befall the Narmada too in a few years time.

The proper way to go about managing the surface and sub-surface water flows in a river basin is to start from the ridges of the topmost micro-watersheds that constitute the catchment of the river and then work down to the river itself. It is economically much cheaper and environmentally much safer to do this and big dams should only be built to

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

service the needs that cannot be met through in situ water conservation and extraction. However, since this decentralised water management requires very simple technology that has been around for thousands of years from the time of the ancient Harappan civilisation (Agrawal & Narain, 1997) it does not appeal to the engineers and people like Nehru who like to think big and spend big even if on borrowed money. "Rhinang krittang ghritang pibet" - borrow and drink clarified butter as the ancient Indian saying goes. Such hugely over designed dams create serious problems of submergence of forests rich in bio-diversity and communities rich in cultural diversity. There is no money left after building the dams, canals and powerhouses to compensate for these environmental and social costs and these have to be borne by the people displaced. No wonder then that Nehru had to repeatedly use his rhetorical abilities in urging the oustees to suffer in the interests of the country. Shrewd as he was, he cleverly used the religious symbolism of temples and sacrifices to delude a populace that was deeply bound in religious superstition, regardless of its religion, caste and class, into blindly following the path of destructive modern development. Even today all public projects start with a religious "bhoomi puja" ceremony to propitiate the Gods despite the Indian state constitutionally being a secular one.

Nevertheless, the great thing about the NWDT award is that it has detailed and very good provisions for the rehabilitation and resettlement of the oustees of the dam on the principle of land for land as compensation, a first for this country because in earlier dams like the one at Bhakra over the Sutlej river in Himachal Pradesh (Dharmadhikary, op cit) the oustees had been given short monetary shrift and mostly left to their own devices, as has been borne out by Subhadra's own fate. Thus it went beyond the limited framework of the Land Acquisition Act, which only provides for monetary compensation in accordance with prevailing market rates of land in a particular area. Typically in adivasi areas the market rates for land do not reflect the immense value that it has for the adivasis' livelihoods and so they get palmed off with pittances and become destitutes. So the only positive outcome of the dogfight that had ensued between the states over the apportioning of the costs and benefits of the SSP was the recognition of the important legal principle of land for land as compensation.

The Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra Governments fought for and won exemplary rehabilitation provisions, the costs of which were to be borne by the Gujarat Government. Each adult son was to get a minimum of two hectares of irrigated land and villages were to be resettled together in one place as a community with all civic amenities like parks, roads, electricity and drinking water. All people who were to lose more than twenty five per cent of their land were to be so compensated and the determination of this submergence would have to be according to the backwater level which increases with distance upstream from the dam. There were some drawbacks like no provision for landless and encroacher families and the unique nature of the adivasis' relationship to their natural habitat but overall it was vastly better than anything that had existed previously (NWDT, 1978). Later on when the NBA went to the Supreme Court then it was these solid legal provisions more than all the arguments and facts marshalled by the NBA regarding the negative environmental and economic fallout that formed the core on which the construction of the dam could be stayed and delayed for over a decade.

The World Bank sent a review team in 1978 to assess the application for a loan for the SSP made by the Government of Gujarat immediately after the NWDT award. The review team made suggestions for the conduct of various environmental and technical studies and also sanctioned a preliminary loan to the Gujarat Government for preparing a detailed project plan. Finally in 1985 an agreement was reached between the World Bank and the Gujarat

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Government for the sanction of the loan. The novel feature of this agreement again like the NWDT award was its stress on proper rehabilitation. It even went one step further and stipulated that even landless and encroacher oustees would have to be provided land as compensation. A separate loan was sanctioned for the rehabilitation component to make sure that the rehabilitation of the oustees was not sacrificed on the plea of lack of funds. Finally there was a conditionality that was to prove crucial later on in the struggle to stop the World Bank funding - the withholding of funding if the rehabilitation pre-conditions were not fulfilled according to schedule (World Bank, 1985). The Japanese Government too riding piggyback on the World Bank's approval sanctioned a tied loan for the purchase of the hydroelectric power generating turbines from Sumitomo Corporation.

In 1980 the Forest Conservation Act was enacted by the Central Government to control the rampant destruction of forests that was taking place and had led to the forest cover coming down to just about eleven percent of the land mass of the country as was revealed by satellite imagery (Agrawal & Narain, 1982). Under this it was mandatory for all development projects to have environmental impact studies done and on the basis of these get approval from the newly constituted Ministry of Environment and Forests. So the SSP and also the ISP had to get this crucial clearance before work could be started on it. As late as 1986 the Ministry of Environment and Forests circulated a note that was critical of both the projects stating that their environmental impact assessments had not been completed and that the environmental problems arising out of these projects would be of a severe nature. It also said that a strong case could be made out for reducing the heights of both the dams (MoEF, 1986). Just about this time the kickback scandal in the purchase of the Bofors military field guns by the Government of India became public considerably embarrassing the then Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi who was the grandson of Nehru (Muralidharan, 2004). His earlier unassailable position as the Congress party's supreme leader came to be jeopardised and so in an effort to muster political support within his party he had to bend to the demands of his party members from Gujarat and order the Ministry of Environment and Forests to give conditional permission in June 1987 to both the SSP and the NSP despite the lack of environmental impact studies, compensatory afforestation plans and catchment treatment programmes. What had been an obsession for the grandfather became a compulsion for the grandson. With finances and permissions under their belt the authorities in Gujarat began construction of the dam with gusto.

Meanwhile an NGO in Gujarat, Arch-Vahini, had begun to organise the oustees there to demand proper rehabilitation and resettlement in accordance with the NWDT award, as some preliminary displacement around the damsite had already taken place. This NGO got in touch with us to start the same process in Madhya Pradesh and gave us the relevant documents. So in 1985 we began holding meetings in the villages that were going to be submerged. About this time we got a letter from Vasudha Dhagamvar of a Delhi based NGO named MARG, who also wanted to do some work on this issue. Vasudha said that she would be touring the affected villages on the Maharashtra side and that we should team up to launch a joint campaign for proper rehabilitation of the oustees. So I arranged for a meeting at my favourite bivouac spot on the banks of the river in Jalsindhi in December 1985. Due to some logistical problems this meeting eventually took place in the temple village of Hapeshwar instead just across the border from Madhya Pradesh in Gujarat. Medha Patkar had accompanied Vasudha on this their maiden tour of the Maharashtra villages and so the three of us sat down over a dinner generously provided by the Mahant or head priest of the temple to discuss future plans. This was the humble beginning of the struggle, which was to rock the valley and the world so significantly later on.

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We started off in sedate fashion by making the simple demand for proper rehabilitation for all the oustees. We said that the government must prepare a comprehensive plan that provided for alternative land and habitation sites for the oustees of the nearly three hundred villages to be submerged by the dam before it began construction of the dam itself. Medha Patkar who had earlier been working with another NGO in Gujarat started working full time on this campaign and she soon unearthed a mine of information regarding not only the problems with the rehabilitation of the oustees but the overall cost-benefit analysis of the dam itself. As various people unearthed more and more information, it became clear that during the design of the dam and its distribution network wild and baseless assumptions had been made to either reduce or externalise the costs and inflate the benefits (Ram, 1993). Nevertheless we pursued with our efforts to get the government to prepare and then begin implementing an acceptable rehabilitation and resettlement plan prior to and not *pari passu* with the construction of the dam.

Within one year's time by the end of 1986 we realised that the government had no intention of rehabilitating all the oustees in accordance with the NWDT award. After this the Government of Gujarat began construction on the riverbed of the dam from 1987 onwards and this put pressure on the diverse mass organisations fighting for the rehabilitation of the oustees in the three states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat to step up their efforts to get a better deal for the oustees. These organisations had in the mean time been able to garner respectable mass followings and had organised large demonstrations sometimes on their own and sometimes jointly to press their demands. They decided to get their act together and constitute a joint front having sufficient critical mass and geographical spread so as to have greater impact on the government and the public at large. Dissatisfied with the response of the state governments as well as the central government these organisations decided to oppose the construction of the dam in toto in 1988. Thus the Narmada Bachao Andolan was born. Medha Patkar with her indefatigable energy and mobilising powers managed to involve other mass organisations, NGOs and individuals in India and abroad who were not directly concerned with the struggle in the valley to form support groups for lobbying, publicity and fundraising on a scale hitherto not seen in environmental mass movements in India. Medha composed the very popular theme song, which started in this way -

Narmada ki ghati mein ab ladai jari hai (The struggle is now on in the Narmada valley)

Chalo uttho, chalo uttho, rokna vinash hai (Rise up, Rise up and stop this destruction)

Throughout 1987 and 1988 there were many mass actions against the dam in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat and even in Delhi in which the people repeatedly courted arrest breaking prohibitory orders clamped around the high security areas near the seats of power. The first major action of the NBA to try and actually physically stop the work on the dam was a mass march in February 1989. Initially it was planned that there would be a two-pronged move towards the dam site. The adivasis from Maharashtra and Alirajpur would walk down the riverbanks to reach the dam site. The people from Nimar in Madhya Pradesh would go by trucks via the highways and the people from Gujarat would join them. I argued that since this would be well publicised there was no way in which the government of Gujarat would let these two masses of people reach the dam site and we would only be arrested at a distance far from the dam site wherever the police decided to stop us. So I put forth the plan that we have a third unpublicised phalanx of equal strength which would go secretly by a route through the hills and reach the dam site at the break of dawn to surround the massive concrete mixer and stop it from working thus actually stopping work on the dam. This proposal did not find favour with anyone else and was summarily shot down.

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Now we in the KMCS were a riotous unruly lot beholden to no one - an anarchic group of headstrong individuals that operated with just the bare minimum of discipline and cohesion necessary to keep the group together. Moreover apart from one person who later distanced herself from our happy go lucky ways and joined the NBA, none of us had any illusions that we would be able to eventually stop the dam. Nevertheless we participated wholeheartedly in the mass actions of the NBA because they provided the thrill and fun of fighting the state and the World Bank on a much larger scale than would have been possible with the KMCS alone. I was not going to let such a golden opportunity of enjoying myself to the hilt go by so easily and in a meeting of our own we decided to go ahead with my plan. What was the point in symbolically courting arrest like we had done so many times before without actually stopping the work of the dam we felt.

We surveyed a route through the hills that would take us to the concrete mixer without anyone getting to know about it. We picked a spot about two hours walk from the dam site where we would camp on the night before and then make the sally to the dam site in the wee hours so as to reach the concrete mixer just when dawn was breaking. I made it clear to everyone that we should not have any weapons or canes whatsoever as armed conflict would lead to criminal cases being registered against us which would prove painful and expensive later on when we would have to repeatedly go to attend the court hearings in Gujarat. So all we were to do was entwine our hands, surround the concrete mixer shouting slogans, and wait for the police. This way we would be arrested under preventive laws, which do not require court attendance later on as the offences are compounded immediately by the executive magistrates.

On the appointed day some three hundred of us set off as planned and everything went like clockwork. While the two main phalanxes were stopped many kilometres away from the dam site we managed to reach the concrete mixer and surround it at the break of dawn and stop work on the dam. Immediately there was a furore as the workers and officers of the construction company all gathered round. All the police had been deployed to tackle the two main phalanxes and so none were available to deal with us. We had the time of our life for all of two hours shouting slogans and singing songs, keeping the concrete mixer inoperative. "Koi nahin hatega, baandh nahin banega" - no one will move, the dam will not be built, the most famous slogan of the NBA would rend the air frequently interspersed with the song, "Narmada ni ghati ma amri larai chalu chhe" - In the valley of the Narmada our struggle continues, a Bhili adaptation of the NBA theme song. The whole labour force of around five hundred people and all the trucks came to a standstill. Finally a small force of ten policemen and a sub-inspector arrived with buses offering to take us to talk to the district collector about our demands. Bava of Jalsindhi, who was later to become very famous for writing a classical deep ecological letter to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in defence of his right to lead his natural lifestyle (Mahariya, 1999), rose up in regal style and said that the collector did not have the answers to our problems and that the Prime Minister of India should come to talk to us and till then we would not budge an inch! He was greeted with a roar of approval from the rest of us, which reverberated sonorously around the surrounding hills.

Things went on in this grand fashion till after some time two truckloads more of policemen arrived. Then began a tug-of war with the police trying to forcibly load us into the buses and we spreading ourselves out on the road entwined with each other. Finally the police had to resort to baton charging and kicking us to drive some sense and fear into our heads. The concrete mixer and the work of the dam began again after having been stopped for

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all of four hours. This was the only time that the work on the dam was stopped by mass action before being stopped later by a stay order of the Supreme Court during the pendency of a petition filed before it by the NBA. We were taken away to a stadium and kept there for two hours given snacks for our troubles and then allowed to go free with a warning not to return again! We hired three buses and returned to Alirajpur with the satisfaction of having done a good job.

Another such memorable action took place in the spring of 1990. The construction of the dam had reached a stage where there was the possibility of submergence of land in the first village in Maharashtra in the coming monsoons. Medha Patkar and three other people launched into one of the many hunger strikes by the NBA in Mumbai with the principal demand that the Maharashtra Government press for the stoppage of work on the dam as rehabilitation of the oustees had not been completed. Some of our people and activists too were there in support. It was decided in Mumbai that support demonstrations would have to be held in the Narmada valley to build up pressure. So the activists came back and said that a rally and rasta roko andolan - blocking of traffic on a highway, would have to be organised in Alirajpur. I said that this was all right with me only if it was agreed that the rasta roko would not be lifted under any circumstances thus forcing the police to take action against us. Moreover since this time we were on home turf we were not to balk at giving back to the police in their own coin when they did finally resort to force to remove us! I had in the meantime already been implicated falsely by the police in Maharashtra in a case of murder and had just been released from jail on bail and so it was decided that I would be spared another sojourn in jail and left to handle things from behind the scenes while the actual agitation would be conducted by the rest of the gang.

I went to meet the subdivisional police officer and give him the notice that we would be demonstrating in front of the office of the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA) in Alirajpur on a particular day. Given our reputation for disruptive activity he immediately asked me apprehensively whether we were going to organise a peaceful law abiding demonstration or not and I assured him with a straight face that it would not cause him any trouble at all! On the day of the agitation a rally was taken out through the streets of Alirajpur and then the whole two hundred or so people went into the office of the NVDA and told the officers and staff to get out as they were henceforth going to be staying there. Very soon the office was cleared of its staff and the KMCS ruled in it. Immediately the SDO Police came with police reinforcements and was given a charter of demands by the agitators. Once again Bava, who had perfected his style by now, demanded that the Prime Minister of India should come and satisfy him and only then would he and his people vacate the premises. So the people spent the night in the office shouting slogans and singing songs.

Early next morning all the people came on to the Indore - Vadodara highway that ran in front of the office and the rasta roko andolan began. In next to no time traffic began piling up on both sides. The SDO Police had to jump out of his bed and come rushing to the spot with truckloads of policemen. He pleaded with the agitating people that he had already sent their charter of demands to the higher authorities and that they should desist from causing public inconvenience. At this Bava launched into a tirade on the inconvenience that the government was causing to thousands like him which was of no concern to it as it was preoccupied only with the inconvenience of city people. He ended grandiloquently with his standard refrain about the summoning of the Prime Minister of India.

Obviously things could not continue for long in this fashion and suddenly a company of Mounted Police was called up and they and the police charged the people sitting and

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shouting slogans on the road. As planned the people too let the police have it and a free for all ensued which was naturally won by the police. The activists were arrested and the rest of the people dispersed. Watching from a hidden location I saw a grand sight, which will forever remain etched in my memory. Khemla's father Chena by then a venerable old man of over seventy years of age was also among the protesters sitting on the road. As soon as the police action began he stood up, a lean figure dressed only in a dhoti tied around his waist covering the traditional "kushta" or loin cloth and a pugree round his head, and started beating his chest with his fist and shouting abuses at the police to come and kill them the louts as there seemed to be no place in this country for the adivasis. "Bomgola nakhin mari nakh tuhri ***** " he shouted repeatedly as if in a trance - " Bomb us to extinction you *****". It was an awesome sight and it must have had some effect on the police also because they did not touch him and he went on in this fashion while all hell was being let loose around him. Finally he walked off in a dignified manner after the activists including Khemla's wife had been arrested and the rest dispersed. Chena is no more now but that one act of insouciant defiance capping his earlier career of rebellion in his youth has made him immortal for me.

Khemla and I had been given the responsibility of managing things after the dispersal and so we had already planned that the people should regroup at a location on the outskirts of the town where we would cook and eat a meal and then take out yet another rally protesting the police action. We had also arranged for photographers earlier to take pictures of everything that happened that day from hidden locations so that we would have a good story for the press. While the food was being cooked I saw yet another example of the insouciance of the Bhil adivasis that indeed made my day for me. One of the men was stretched out on the ground under the searing summer sun in his kushta covered from top to toe with his dhoti taking forty winks. Here were we taken to the cleaners by the police and with every possibility of being beaten up once again when we went back into the town with a rally in a few hours and yet this man thought it more prudent to catch up on lost sleep than worry about the police! The repeat rally after this passed off peacefully mainly due to the fact that the IAS officer who was the SDM was a decent fellow at heart and had given strict orders to the police that unless we created any law and order problem once again no action should be taken against us. The next day the papers were full of our story and as a result the Inspector General of Police had to come down from Indore to assess the illegality of the actions of the administration.

So the whole exercise turned out to be a roaring success from our limited local point of view as it was yet another feather in the cap of the KMCS. But this demonstration, a similar one in Barwani on that day led by no less a personality than Baba Amte, the great man, despite his spinal disability, heroically standing for seven hours with his arms locked round the gate of the SDM's office which had been padlocked by the NBA and the hunger strike in Mumbai did not in the end result in the stoppage of work on the dam. Medha Patkar and others withdrew their hunger strike after a few days on being given an assurance by the Government of Maharashtra that no one would be allowed to be submerged without proper rehabilitation. But the Government of Maharashtra later reneged on its assurance and refused to seek the stoppage of work on the dam.

The hunger strike is the ultimate strategic action of the satyagrahi in Gandhian political action. It is a do or die action and leads on either to victory or the death of the hunger striker. A crucial requirement for its success is that there should be a massive mobilisation of people in support of it to put sufficient moral pressure on the state. As we shall see later even with mass support the hunger strike has been successful in getting its

demands fulfilled on a few occasions only. Thus this strategy should never have been adopted at that early stage when such a mass support was not available. The hunger strike is an additional action that complements and gives point to the mass mobilisation process and cannot be a substitute for it. This adoption at the very outset, as a substitute for a process of building up of a wider and stronger mass movement, of what should have been the ultimate strategy, underlined the weakness of the anti-dam movement vis-a-vis the state. This was to set a trend for the NBA later on, with the further reduction of mass strength, of numerous hunger strikes and jal samarpan or drowning in the river agitations, which were always either withdrawn on some assurance or other or the participants arrested by the state after some time.

Before this on September 28th 1989 the first ever India level mass rally against destructive development had been held in Harsud a town that has since been submerged by the ISP. This marked a watershed in the history of the environmental movement in this country. Before this there had not been any country wide mass mobilisation on environmental issues. Whether it was the Chipko movement (Guha, 1989) to save the forests in the Gahrwal Himalayas of Uttaranchal or the campaign to save the rich biodiversity of Silent Valley in Kerala from being submerged by a dam (Martin, 2004), these had all been single-issue agitations, which did not try to build up a comprehensive nationwide opposition to destructive modern development. This was the first time that thousands of people from all over the country had gathered together at one place to declare their resolve to fight for the initiation of people centred governance and development that was environmentally sustainable as against the prevalent paradigm in which the vast majority of the people and the environment had both been devastated.

The whole proceedings were raised to a higher moral ground by the presence of Baba Amte. Baba Amte is a modern sage who has straddled the spheres of charitable service, constructive rural development work and mass agitational work in India like a colossus. He declared at the Harsud meeting that he had spent all his life fighting for the physically disabled leprosy patients but found that the adivasis while being physically able were in an even worse state disabled by their innocence of the devious ways of the modern state and market. So he had taken up the cause of justice for the adivasis in the twilight years of his life and decided to come and reside in the Narmada valley and take part in the struggles of the NBA. Shivarama Karanth the noted novelist from Karnataka was also present at this rally as was the noted film actress and social activist Shabana Azmi.

Fittingly Baba Amte himself set the independent tone for this new mobilisation. When two senior national leaders of a political party too came to the Harsud meeting uninvited and straight away proceeded to take their place on the stage, Baba Amte immediately objected saying that they were welcome to participate but as per the decision of the organising committee only those selected to speak from various organisations could sit on the stage and requested these leaders to get down and sit on the ground with the masses instead and they had to do so. This was thus at that point of time a genuine attempt to evolve a new kind of mass based politics hitherto not seen in this country. It was also an indication that Madhya Pradesh, which is one of the most backward states in the country, had become the epicentre of this new movement by virtue of the various struggles being waged so valiantly in its different parts. In a follow up meeting of activists at night after the mass meeting it was decided to hold a two-day convention in Bhopal in early December 1989 to coincide with the public meeting that is held every year by the Bhopal Gas Peedith Mahila Udyog Sangathan

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

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

on 3rd December to commemorate the people who died in the fatal gas leak from the Union Carbide factory on that day in 1984.

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