

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECTS OF NARMADA BACHAO ANDOLAN

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Abstract: The fact is that Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has been a major issue for debate among various scholars since a long time. Therefore, one of the most powerful campaigns of civil disobedience since 1980 has been against the construction of a huge Dam on the Narmada River just below the point of at which it flows into Gujarat state. The resulting Lake called the Sardar Sarovar in honour of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The finance for the construction of the Dam was to come from loans from the World Bank and from the Japanese government approximately 245 and 254 villages came under submerged area. To resolve the problem of rehabilitation of people, many activists worked together against the policy of government. But ultimately, this project has been started after an official inauguration by Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi very recently. The present research paper highlights the retrospect and prospects of NBA.

Keywords: Environment, Sardar Sarovar, Dams, NBA, Activists, Government.

Introduction: Actually, big dams create problems of displacement which are almost impossible to be solved. The government argued that its command area is bigger than its submergence area. But only to consider this proportion is not proper. It is also necessary to see how many people have their habitats near the dam area and whether in this area there are fertile lands and Jungle rich in biodiversity. We have to evaluate the loss caused by submergence and to see whether it is unbearable. The fact behind it is that there is a great variety of wild creatures in the area. They will not be only displaced but may face extinction supplementary forestation is not likely to make up this loss, as the jungle under submergence are the reservoirs of natural species, developed through cross is at years. It is not possible to re-correct them. Moreover, it has been argued by many scholars against this project as under:

- The possibility of earthquakes would be more in view of the large size of the dam.
- The deposition of silt in the base of dam may restore flow of huge quantum of water.
- The stagnant waters of the reservoir would spread water borne diseases in adjoining areas.
- The rehabilitation of tribal and other people may be improper.

However, all these issues have been raised not only for above mentioned project of big dams but for other projects also. The experts are of the view that for sustainable development, it is necessary to construct small dams. That will not only save cost energy but also not be harmful for the environment. Nevertheless, we can't ignore the fact that the Sardar Project has been designed to provide irrigation water to drought hit of areas of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. This project which is estimated for cost cover Rs. 6400 crores will provide irrigation faces to about 18 Lakh hacters of land and create installed capacity of power of 1450MW. It will also provide drinking water for 295 Lakh. People reside in 131 towns and 4720 villages in Gujarat. Because proper steps should be taken in order to maintain the regional eco-balance.

The Narmada Bachao Movement: Megha Patekar and Baba Amte made a long struggle against the Sardar Sarover Project. Actually, the organization that was formed to fight this project- The Narmada Bachao Andolan is often described as 'Environmental' because it received support from many environmentalist groups around the world. The goal of the movement was to create an alternative political culture based on Gandhian principles as: "Nature produces enough to meet the needs of all the people but not enough to satisfy the greed of anyone".

The two main leaders, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte have also used fasting as a weapon after with some success. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is best seen as a campaign for economic betterment that involves Gandhian style began as early as 1978 in Nimar, but the movement flagged in the early 1980's. Medha Patkar came to the area first in 1985 as a member of research team that was investigating the resettlement of peasants affected by the project. She was deeply disturbed to find that the people were being evicted from their land and livelihood with no proper compensation. Secondly, no proper environment studies had been carried out in this regard. That is why; she decides to settle in the valley and fight against the dam project.

In this perspective it may be noticed that a series of rallies, protest, marches, demonstrators and fasts gradually increased. Medha patkar herself went twice to Washington to put the case directly to the World Bank. Gurjrat government notified the whole of the dam site a prohibited area and threatened that any protestor who entered this area would be arrested. Meanwhile, the first success came in 1990, when the NBA managed to persuade the Japanese government to withdraw all further funding for the project on environmental and human rights grounds.

In the same year in 1990, the much respected Gandhian social worker Baba Amte became actively involved in the struggle. In 1985 he had involved in a mass protest against the construction

of two dams in Bastar that was a threat to the Adivassis of the area. The two dams were now built. In 1989 he published his book 'Cry O Beloved Narmada', in which he argued that the desire for large dams was a form of modern superstition. In 1990, he established an ashram on the banks of the Narmada. He vowed to stay there and fight against the dam project to his last breath. In Gandhian style, he staged a Dharna in Delhi, before the residence of the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, demanding that construction work be stopped. The Prime Minister, under pressure from the Gujarat government rejected the demand.

In December 1990 around 3000 people started out on a march from Nimar to the site of the dam. After eight days, the state police stopped them at the border of Gujarat. Rather than go back, they silently showed their non-violent protest. But they were beaten by the police. Therefore, Medha Patkar and five others launched an indefinite fast. But every suggestion from the NBA was ruined down flat. The fast was called off having lasted twenty two days. Despite the failure, the protest had received huge publicity and Medha Patkar had become an all India and International figure. The World Bank decided to investigate the matter by setting up a commission of enquiry. The Report of the commission was in favour of NBA. As a result of this report, the World Bank withdrew the financial support for the project in 1993.

The NBA had meanwhile challenged the legality of the project in the Supreme Court of India in New Delhi in 1994. It was the court accepted that there had been various irregularities in the implementation of the project. It ruled that the construction work should cease for the time being at a height of 88 meters pending a review. As the projected height of the dam was to be 138 meters, this was considered a major victory for the NBA. After the court hearing it was argued that rather than go on opposing the project, it would be better to get a better deal for those who were being displaced. Medha Patkar refused to accept this. That is why; she advanced the Gandhian argument that the struggle was for decentralisation of power, with local people having the right to decide how their resources should be utilized.

Medha Patkar now focused through Jal Samarpan. Now all the activists stayed with the peasant in their villages as the water rose, refusing to move even at the risk of drowning. This was called Jal Samarpan – which means give one's life to the water. First Jal Samarpan was took place in 1993 at Mani Betli, a village very close to the suite of the dam. In 1994 Baba Amte and his wife refused to move from their house by the river and were only saved from drowning by forcefully removed by DC. During the Monsoon of 1999 when Medha Patkar went to stay in Domkhedi- One of the drowning villages, she and sixty others were arrested by the police.

Medha Patkar was joined in the late 1990s by the celebrity author Arundhati Roy, in favour of the movement which gained a lot of media attention both in India and abroad. In January 2000 Roy was arrested while leading a protest March against the dam. In October 2000 there was a grave set back to the movement when the Supreme Court ruled by a 2-1 majority that construction work on the dam could be resumed to bring it up to 90 meters and there after it stages to an eventual height of 138 meters. The inauguration of the construction was held on 31 October 2000, on the 125th anniversary of the birth of Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, the man after whom the reservoir is named. The function was presided over by L .K. Advani who spoke against anti-national forces: “ I sometime wonder whether these people are working at the behest (order) of our own people or outsiders. I want to be proved wrong, but it surprises me. Why is there so much opposition to develop projects?”

In spite of many objections raised by environmentalists and socialists, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October 2017 inaugurated the highest embankment in a river in the country to the nation. Originally commissioned in 2006, the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam was recently increased to 138.68 meters. The height increase would allow the Sardar Sarovar dam to retain 4.73 million acres of water.

A Critical Appraisal: Thus this movement can be termed as the Gandhian movement. Baba Amte was clearly Gandhian and Medha Patkar also makes no such claim. Yet all the activities saw themselves as fighting the battle against Nehru’s version of development. Baba Amte and Medha Patkar were widely seen to be above narrow party politics and to be true champions of the people- as were Gandhian and J.P. Dutt just like Gandhi, Patkar and Amte managed to bring together rich farmers and Adivasis within one movement, even though the two groups of this region have very little in common. But they became one in their struggle. It was a great success of this Satyagrah of Narmada.

On the other side, the strongest grounds for this struggle are neither environmental nor religious, but those of the rights of citizens to a livelihood, freedom from arbitrary acts of state. All of these basic rights are violated by Narmada project. The struggle began as a local demand for social justice but later it expanded as a critique of a whole system of rule which wanted to violate the need of one section of the population for the sake of development projects which enrich those who are already well off.

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