

## **The Hindu**

Thursday, November 02, 2000

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2000/11/02/stories/05022524.htm>

### **For whom the bell tolls**

By Devaki Jain

THE NARMADA valley has to be seen to be believed. Looking up at the hill slopes on either side, from a boat on the river, we see cattle and goats grazing on rich green fodder lands. Women are washing. Young men from the tribal communities wearing beads and silver jewellery sit on the banks and slopes playing the flute. Driving from Indore to Maheshwar and beyond, the road side is adorned by incredibly tidy fields of food crops, fruit orchards. Entering houses in the villages on the way, usually housing large joint families, we see healthy babies, laughing strong women whose granaries are full, whose cattle give them the necessary milk and who have no water storage. A haven of peace.

What madness is it that wants to bury this space? While on the one hand, we wish to inhibit rural migration into the cities and towns, want to provide food, water, shelter and livelihood in the rural areas, spending crores under rural development, on the other, we want to drive a settled group of people into a "basket" of assistance and dependence. Drive them into small townships with their shacks and slums - women and children on the streets always under some stress of deprivation.

Whatever the leaders and Governments say on their capacity to rehabilitate the families that will be displaced from the Narmada valley, it is these peripheral habitats that the families from the valley will join. What land can they be given with which they can simulate their earlier lives? One man I met on my journey to the valley said he would prefer cash compensation. This is also a typical response of men who usually prefer cash - remember Chipko? Men wanted to sell the trees for cash? Women needed the trees for fuel and fodder. With the cash a man may buy a shop and be content. It is the women who face the brunt of a change, which distances water, food, kitchen garden, fodder and fuel supplies. It is the women who are in the vanguard of the Narmada Bachao Andolan's protest.

When young tribal boys and girls are replanted in their recreated habitats, they will mutate into harsh discontented social forces - and their restlessness will not only hurt others, but will hurt themselves. The disturbance in the valley is not going to remain a problem only for the displaced. The very same Governments of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, and the Centre - who see this only as a problem of water and power - will rue the day they turned away from the deeper wounds they are making into their own body politic.

Currently, the mainstream debate on the legitimacy of the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Dam is quite naturally concentrating on the Supreme Court judgment. It is argued that once such a judgment is passed - after years of sharing of knowledge, building up of public action events, several Government-created reviews, national and international advocacy against the raising of the height of the dam - the public action and resistance activities have to be ended, as there is no further space.

At the other end, the debate concentrates on three points. One, that the judgment has not taken note of the facts and contradicts itself, since the very legal provisions on which it bases its judgment have already been violated. Two, that the choice between a mega project such as the Sardar Sarovar and the needs of the people living in the threatened area is skewed against the poor. The impact of the dam, the benefit of its construction, as well as its power and water outcomes, will benefit the better-off classes. Water will not reach the thirsty people of Kutch, and the unit cost of power will be greater than what poor people can afford. Third, that it reveals the undemocratic nature of the state. The state is not listening to the voice of a broad-based struggle and opinion, but is going by the criteria of politicians who are in collusion with contractors.

The road ahead has been defined as one of confrontation - in the sense of a struggle to capture the very land which will be inundated or the construction which is to be completed. This is where there is need to pause and reflect on the earlier history of non-violent struggle and the earlier experience of the use of broad-based support. This is not the first time that mass action has been ignored and the lives of masses of people have been broken by an undemocratic state. Nor will it be the last. We may recall Gandhi's satyagrahas. But Gandhi too, like Jayaprakash Narayan later, had to educate people, both those at the actual ground level as well as those up in power, and those not directly involved, about the issues at stake, in his various battles for justice, especially for the masses.

For the struggle in the Narmada Valley, this is what is needed. The awakening of an ever-widening circle of activists, whether they are in the academic, judicial, business, or social change arena, about the dismantling of this temple. It is a temple not only because of its grace, its all-embracing power, its offer of salvation to so many thousands of species including people. But it is also a temple for those who are working towards making the state, the judiciary and the Indian elite more sensitive to environment, more sensitive to the innovations now available for aesthetic and efficient generation of power and use of water, conservation of the nutrients in soil. It is also a temple for those who imagine that they can transform the lives of the most deprived, without taking cognisance of institutions of democracy and how they need to be strengthened through electoral reform, through improving the quality of representation, through participating in politics in order to transform politics.

This kind of strategy of communication, using this apex court judgment as an alarm bell, through public education is perhaps what Gandhi would have done. He used to take five to seven years receding from one 'failure' before he renewed his next struggle. The interim was used to think and also to enable his followers to think and to spread knowledge.

A campaign needs to be initiated in the dry areas of Gujarat where people being postulated as the beneficiaries assume that five to 10 years down the line they will have a green space - so that their rights and hopes are not violated in the same way as those whose land and livelihood are being inundated.

Next a whole series of presentations, in every form of the media including books, which portray the lives of those displaced by earlier mega projects such as the Bhakra Nangal dam. What kind of life are the children of the Bakra Nangal oustees living today? What about the soil and the agricultural and power programmes that were envisaged as outputs of the Bhakra dam? The TV cameras need to help us to understand whether promises have been kept. Finally, a deep wide scan which captures the voices of the "to be displaced" persons, especially the young men and women of the tribal communities.

While this is happening, perhaps the struggle would pause rather than precipitate itself into a confrontation which would divide the ranks and also make people complacent. It has always been the case, worldwide, that when there is a real battle on, civil society turns away because then it is only like a cricket match - they watch to see who wins.

On the other hand, if the confrontation does not take place but the pause becomes one for inviting the participation of more people in preventing the demolition of the temple, then it might not only bring more support and make a better case for another round of negotiations even at the level of the state, but it would also educate the Indian public on the nature of development that is taking place and how it is like the scorpion. What looks benign today will be poisonous tomorrow.