

The Voice of Commonsense



Kersi Sabavala

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Kersi Sabavala.

(In Memory of Kersi Sabavala)

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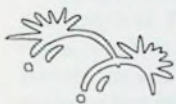
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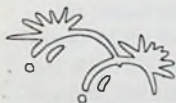
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Part I

The Voice of Common Sense

It is an emotional moment for all of us to present some of the writings on Narmada issue and other relevant issues by our friend Kersi Sabavala. In the short span of life, Kersi had endeared himself to all those who had come in his contact, as a warm, sensitive, pleasant and committed friend with a knack for acute observations and analysis. He was a poet, with a flair of language - a subtle, ironical tinge in it. He was not among those who could be termed as a prominent person, intellectual, or a social activist; he defied all these frames. He was a normal human being, with an innate urge for a sane society, sensitive to one's fellow around him with a deep concern, commitment and wide knowledge.

Though he did not have any specific colour of a party or a dogma, ideology he definitely had. That was why he identified himself with the struggles for the rights of tribals, of the displaced, dispossessed and labourers in and around Baroda. He had been a constant source of physical and moral support for the organisations like Narmada Bachao Andolan, Vadodara Kamdar Union, Parivartan, Nagrik Forum and scores of such genuine groups. He was one of them, mingling into the groups with ease, as a part of it. He was never in forefront as that was not his trait. Like a true friend, he was with you in your hour of crisis or in joy, unassumingly, with a mischievous twinkle in his beautiful eyes sparkling behind the spectacles. His friends still remember his easy, spontaneous, charming and pleasant presence, his hurried footsteps, eager arguments regarding the issues that were close to his heart.

He was a trusted friend, an unproclaimed activist of Narmada Bachao Andolan with the deep affection, care and concern for his friends. Persons like Kersi have been cool corners for the harried activists to express themselves, to gossip, to cry, to laugh, shout at, to question, to introspect one's own concerns and ways. Kersi maintained the trust reposed on him, loved, cared for the activists, pressed them to have normal food, brought fruits, mirth and laughter. He would be the first to go on his two wheeler at any hour in the crisis situation - at the dam site or at the Vadgam, or during the Satyagraha in monsoons, in canal affected villages or in any corner of Baroda. He never made any fuss about that or projected his 'services'.

He passionately defended secularism. He just could not 'understand' the 'logic' of the fundamentalists and communal forces like Vishwa Hindu Parishad and RSS. He was unable to grant that anyone could think on such inhuman lines. For him, the struggle against the destructive dam like Sardar Sarovar was intrinsically linked with the struggle against communalism.

On all these issues, Kersi would express himself, either in discussions, in writing and he felt compelled to do so. For him, articulation was not the exclusive forte of the intellectuals, writers. Every normal human being must express oneself. He reacted and had wrote against such crude and cruel ways of 'development' and 'identity', against exploitation, injustice and destruction in form of articles, letters to the editors in the newspapers of Baroda and Ahmedabad. This was so necessary, especially during the days when any voice questioning the Sardar Sarovar was stifled and the political atmosphere along with a section of Gujarati press had gone communal. These sane and compulsive voices at each place, in every nook and corner of society keep the democracy and sanity alive. Kersi used to play this role very consciously.

Through his writings, one can understand the perception of a normal citizen with a common sense, his views, and analysis regarding the social, political processes around him. They bring out informed, well-prepared arguments with data and analysis, about the development projects, concept and social amity. We have included some of these articles and letters in this volume to highlight number of aspects of the people's struggle and perceptions of sensitive and informed citizen about it.

The volume also includes some memories about Kersi, written by those who were near to him. We are particularly thankful to Shri. Rashmibhai Shah, Ronnie Sabavala and Mrs. Avi Sabawala for their help and kindness.

Friends of Kersi



The Friend Extraordinary.

Kersi would peep in our rickety office in Baroda inquiringly, "Hello, well.. Be happy".. and was gone the next moment, reciting some suggestive couplet. And he is no more. That further shrouds our faith in this world. But, then, Kersi was not mere an outer form of a body, which exists at a given moment and disappears at another. He was a like a whiff of fresh, cool air, or a resplendent season which can only be experienced. We, his colleagues in Narmada Bachao Andolan, used to experience Kersi as a part of our being, part of our heads and hearts. Perhaps, that may explain why the friends like me could not overtly show our grief at his loss.

Kersi met me for the first time in his characteristic style, like a cascade of fragrant air in the stifling crowd. On the platform of Jabalpur railway station, with teeming crowd and the entire railway schedule gone haywire, up came a smiling person with hurried demeanour and said "Hello ... well.... I know you." I was taken aback, he continued, "We were destined to meet here..." Here was one of those rare people in Baroda, Gujarat who wanted to help us, when the doubts and questions were being flung at us. Then, for years, Kersi used to meet us like this, whether in the midst of programmes or in peace. But Kersi always appeared to be in a hurry, coming from somewhere and ready to go elsewhere. He belonged to the Andolan, also to all those who have been struggling for justice and for right to life. He was always ready to be with them as a trusted friend, at any time. Our camaraderie had developed from this basic understanding.

However, he was no a philanthropist sans ideology. He had chosen his priorities consciously to work with as associate - from Narmada Bachao Andolan, Vadodara Kamdar Union to number of cultural, feminist and citizen's groups - based on his commitment to the egalitarian, just society to be realised through mass based struggle. He was clear that any comprehensive and basic environmental concern must question the corrupt, unjust and destructive exploitation of natural resources. This concern was reflected in his small factory of gas based incinerators too. He was a friend of those fighting for the cause of the poor and labourers. He also had been a severe critic of the communalism, the communal riots and tensions. He was not among those who would raise the banner before the work starts, but was a conscious friend with a critical appraisal of those who have been marching on the path of struggle on different fronts; he would see that their hands are strengthened and their feet be firm and steady.

He seldom talked about his personal or professional problems, which he had been facing as a small entrepreneur. Avi, his wife, must have been providing strength through her managerial and entrepreneurial skills, in this regard. Kersi's sensitivity, his brilliance and creativity seemed to have little to do with the professional ability. These are all my conjectures only. He never discussed these problems with us, as he had defined his role in the struggle and its programmes.

He wanted to see all of us activists happy. Many of them had left their higher education, homes, and jobs for the sake of their commitment. When, the news had come that the Gujarat police had launched evacuation operation in Vadgam- the first village near the dam site- for the forcible displacement of the tribals threatened with the floods due to the dam. Kersi had driven me on his scooter in the late night for five hours. He used to be angry with us for working till late hours in night. Sullenly he would disappear, only to come with a pile of bananas, shoving them in standing on the staircase. How can we forget his poetry? When the Andolan was going through one of its worst phases with repression, defamation and government adamancy at its peak, all of us had been planning and strategising in a dead serious mood, wondering whether we would be able to stall this outrage at all. At that time Kersi had stuck these lines on the wall:

*When the earthworm and her child were going from Kevadia to Manibeli,
The child felt a bump.
There, my dear", said the mother, "lies Sardar Sarovar dumped".*

It made us smile, reinforced our faith and had provided a sort of assurance. This was his speciality. It came so easily and charmingly to him to heal deep pain with profound understanding and warm empathy.

He was an engineer, with an informed interest in the long-term issues of Alternative Development or immediate issues like the travails of the canal ousts. He was constantly collecting relevant material, had made considerable research about the drinking water problem in Gujarat, the *raison d'être* of Sardar Sarovar, power from tidal waves, destination for Kutch and such other issues. He had been consistently writing on these issues. His letters to the editors in the local English newspapers would counter and expose the tall claims by the dam builders and their propaganda machinery. In each of his comments, orally or in writing, Kersi would bring out an altogether new angle or point. It came with clear perspective, analysis and appropriate information; his apt rejoinders were laced with subtle sarcasm, but without any trace of vengeance. This was done without hurting anyone. No one would know how he could write, study all this during his chores of domestic and professional duties. But, on some day, he would just show sheets of well typed papers with some new 'masterpiece', like a newspaper vendor, standing below on staircase and vanish. That was Kersi.

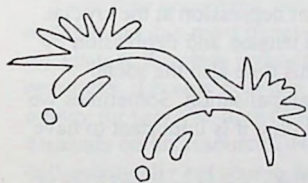
Normally, he would come in the evenings, mostly with some fruits and interesting anecdotes, ideas. "It is late, I will have to go, ... mother is waiting" he would mumble and again stay back over half an hour if he knew that Himanshu was bit depressed or I must have my eyes tested and bought new specs, or the friends are sullen over the recent allegations of foreign money appearing in a section of Gujarati newspapers. The NBA in Baroda has been fortunate to have number of

comrades and sympathisers like Rohit, Thakorbbhai, Maganbbhai, Tulsi Boda, Bina, Hinabehen, and so many. Kersi had a special place in this *biradari* of ours.

In fact, Kersi's friendship and friend circle was beyond our comprehension. One would wonder in how many hearts he had made a niche for himself. Among all kinds of diverse characters, one such was Ulli Stehl, a 65 year 'young' photographer from Canada, working for the Independent Review Mission (Morse Committee) during 1991-92. When she had her leg fractured in one of our villages, and was convalescing in Baroda, Kersi used to care for her, gossip with her. He would go to canal affected Koliari village, to highlight the plight of the canal affected oustees, without giving out any lecture, but to understand them and to be there in solidarity at the time of their protests or crisis. He had spread the roots of genuine humanism and sensitivity throughout all this wide canvass of his circle, through his relations, sensitivities, and ideological commitment.

Kersi left this world after a short illness. We were at Dhule, where hundreds of tribals and activists had converged to protest against the inhuman firing by Maharashtra police killing one of our tribal youth on 18th November 1993. The peaceful march on November 22 was assaulted by the police, leaving hundreds of our villagers injured. We were protesting against this and were on dharna throughout the night. And someone had informed us about Kersi. I neither wanted to hear any further, nor asked any questions. We do not want to do anything around what happened of Kersi... How can he go away from us, and pray, where? He is here in our beings, part of our every pain, joy, laughter even today as a comrade so unparalleled

Medha Patkar.



Visible Vocal Friend Behind the Screen

Kersi was a person with smiling face, full of enthusiasm and was a quick writer in the column of the letters to the editor. Kersi's anger was always articulated in straightforward and polite language. First time, I met Kersi during the street play festival organised by Sahiyar (Women's Organisation), Parivartan, Manthan, Vadodara Kamdar Union and other groups in Vadodara in year 1987-88. He and Avi Sabawala spent more than a week for resource mobilization and to fix up the places of street play in a very communally sensitive areas during the Street Play Festival.

During this time we came across the large number of concerned middle class people, some of whom were to become strong supporters of the people's movements. The credit definitely goes to Kersi. Kersi was in live touch with sensitive people from all the strata of society. This helped a lot in the early phase of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), when the vernacular press used to disseminate wrong information about NBA but due to persons like Kersi and his contacts the movement was able to convey the reality to the media and influential middle class.

He was so wholly mingled with the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Vadodara Kamdar Union and other such groups that he was known to and also in touch with the broader sympathiser's circle of these movements in major parts of the country.

Kersi was one of the main people who organised the oustees of the canal with late Shriharsh, in the first phase of their struggle. Koliari village was the main center, in the first phase of canal-affected people's straggle. I recall long discussion with Kersi during our visit to the Koliari Village. The topics used to vary from secularism, development for whom and at whose cost, women's equality and what not.

As I understand, he was a firm admirer of Gandhian principles and also had a deep commitment and clear ideas about the working class agony, which we had, witnessed during the strike of the Narmada Dam workers. In Kersi's word: "without the working masses involvement, the very existence of the world and its wealth is questionable". He wrote number of good pieces in 'The Times of India' on communal harmony, against the state repression, on working class rights and philosophical peace for 'have not'.

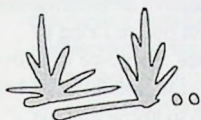
We really miss him. During the temporary phase of depression at the crucial critical phases of the movement, he used to ease the tension and depression by adding philosophical input in a very cheerful way. This time also the social movement is passing through the inhuman phase of globalisation. Sometimes we go under the temporary phase of depression and that time it is important to have a friend like Kersi.

My sister's son Jimmy still recalls Kersi as Kersukaka, because Kersi used to take him to the zoo and garden whenever we had very hectic and tense meetings in the office. Jimmy's mother expired when he was just 4-5 years old and myself and Trupti used to look after him in his early phase. My mother also asked me a number of times about who Kersi, was because Jimmy used to talk lot about him. Even the stories of Kersi also used to last long and sometime in two to three phases and with good conceptual input.

When we informed Jimmy about the death of Kersi, his first reaction was that Kersukaka would inform my mummy that he was all right. Kersi had this knack to be able to make Jimmy as his youngest friend.

Kersi has entered in my heart and mind so much that whenever the word Kersi strikes my mind I can recall his smiling faces with enthusiasm.

Rohit Prajapati



The Ever Smiling, Unsung Activist

I met Kersi first when I called him up one evening in late 1989 when I decided to settle down in Baroda and work on the Narmada issue. Among the several names suggested to me, Kersi's name came up more than once. He immediately invited me to meet him. From that evening till his death on November 22, 1993, he remained a very close friend, philosopher and guide.

I distinctly remember our rides on his scooter to Koliari, Malu, Krishnapura, and a number of other villages that were adversely affected by the on going work on Sardar Sarovar Project, or the so called resettlement sites of those affected by the project. We used to come back very excited from these trips and then strategise how to go to press with these issues, how to take which journalist to these places. The roots of Narmada struggle in Gujarat grew from some of these exposures. The Baroda press slowly became familiar with our visits to their offices. Our narration slowly acquired such authority that soon even the newspapers like 'Times of India', which was a bit indifferent at that time to the people's side of Narmada issue, too started giving place to our stories.

I was then unmarried, but he was not only married, but was running a business and that too in a most benevolent way. I was then much involved in the issue and my visits to his place and our trips were a drain on his meagre time and other resources. It is only now that I realise, now that I am married and try to earn money for survival, how difficult it must have been for him to balance the various demands on his resources. He not only took up all such demands most enthusiastically but also in fact additionally provided his scooter, money and inspiration all the time to us. These may look like small things as one remembers them today, but they were major sacrifices by someone who never thought or considered them as sacrifices.

Slowly the circle of people intensely involved in the Narmada struggle in Baroda increased and so did Kersi's own involvement and contributions. There were some highs and many lows of that period. There were times when one was dejected and wondering if there is any point in all this. but this ever smiling, ever encouraging man was always there to understand and encourage me to remain

involved in the issue. Whether the problem was personal or political, he silently worked to keep us properly encouraged and amused. In our rather hot-headed arguments, the occasions for which were many, he always remained considerate and understanding.

I distinctly remember the day there was to be another massive demonstration in Dhule in protest against the killing of a tribal young man in police firing in Akrani Tehsil of Dhule district, when he called up NBA office, his voice was low and unwell. When I enquired, he said he was alright. Some cold and fever he had brought from his visit to Mumbai. Later that day, I did come to know that his fever had gone up and he was hospitalised. But in the din of the events, I did not bother to find out how serious was his illness. The next day morning, when Rohit Prajapati, part of intimate circle of NBA friends in Baroda, called up to inform about his death, I could not believe. It is difficult to believe it even to this day. The personal sorrow mingled with the political anger when we soon learnt about the brutal lathi charge that the Maharashtra govt had unleashed on the tribal demonstration in Dhule, the news about which came almost simultaneously. But the disbelief that this bespectacled man with half white curling hair and mischievous smile on face is never going to be around, took very long to sink in. As one writes this, his memory crowds out everything else.

Himanshu Thakkar



Honest, Open and Committed

Having a person like Kersi in the family is an experience in enlightenment.

His very warm personality always kept the family alive. While he would bring home the troubles of whomever he met during the day, he would keep the burden to himself. Only his deep sincerity towards helping the person out would betray his worries.

He had a very honest heart and a very open mind. Always ready to learn and eager to teach. A discussion with him on any topic like secularism or women's rights or Narimada Bachao Andolan would show his deep commitment towards supporting the weak and poor. He was a strong upholder of the principle that any development that does not create equal opportunities for those who need it most is a step backward.

While his open mind learnt a lot from what he read and discussed, he was also ready to put in practice what he was convinced of.

His reading arena was very wide. From philosophical books by Thoreau, Kant and Nietze to modern physics by Einstein, Bohr and Hawking. He also had the

noble and humble personality to carry this load of knowledge and wisdom. He also had the communication skills to present it to the people in the words and styles that they would understand. This earned him many friends in the age group of 2 to 92.

He was the one rare person who, even when having a habit of heatedly discussing sensitive matters, had no enemies. His pleasant and loveable personality along with sincerity behind whatever he spoke and wrote was the charm behind this magic.

He was a staunch believer in human dignity and had unflinching faith in the capacities of any and all individuals. He was always ready to give sacrifices in support of just causes. This made him a friend of all. This also included his own factory workers, industrialists, activists and radical thinkers who chanced to meet him.

His generosity and magnanimity kept him financially in tension but that never prevented him from doing one more good turn to the needy.

I have forgotten who said "Those Whom Gods Love, Die Young" but whenever we think of him we are convinced of this.

He will always be alive in the hearts and minds of those who knew him.

Rashmi, Ronnie and families.



Kersi – So Simple, So Different

Kersi immediately strikes one as being different- refreshingly new in his approach. At first approach he was a no frills, down to earth person with a warm sense of humour aimed usually at himself or at events-never to hurt another being. Yet there was much more to him than his exterior.

Immediately on completing his BE (Electrical), Kersi had started a small business manufacturing heating equipment for supplying to industrial users. With no previous background of business, he plunged out on his own with a small loan from the bank. Early in his business career, he came to taste the rough and tumble of business life with associates who let him down and deprived him of his rightful gains- something he was to experience frequently in his life. What was truly admirable was the way he faced these situations with equanimity and without rancour to those who had taken advantage of him and became stronger for it. With every downturn he continued to build up his fledgling business investing in his company. His most important focus was his people. His associates always commented that

he actually ran his business for his employees. A needy person looking for employment was never turned away. People without skills were given employment and trained on the job and some became so skilful that they were able to branch out on their own or get better jobs. A fact which gave Kersi immense happiness & pride. It would have been a great source of pride to such an entrepreneur that when I closed the factory, most of the remaining employees turned into entrepreneurs themselves or were able to obtain good jobs. A true honour to a great entrepreneur!

Being people oriented in his business, Kersi always believed in trust and friendship for another human being. A belief which was frequently misused. Yet, he never failed to forgive such people especially if they were his employees or any poor person. His view was that perhaps the other man needed the money or asset more than he did. When one of his employees defrauded him of a large amount and was detected after a long period of great stress, he was instantly forgiven. That person shortly met a tragic end. True to Kersi's nature he showed great sympathy and generosity towards the bereaved family. Whenever, any of us pointed the injustice of what was happening to him, his response was that the person must have been in dire need to resort to this act. That was typically Kersi - no condemnation, no holier-than-thou attitude. Just forgive and forget and move on. After all "Life is too short" as he would prophetically say.

A visionary was what he was. New ideas, new ways of thinking, an adventurous approach, creative approach to a problem, challenging old and set ways of doing things. "Let's think and do it differently" was what he would say. To all those of us around him, it was never a dull moment. His style was infectious. Brought up as we are in the world of the mundane and learning to be cautious, we sometimes felt his ideas threw caution to the winds. Yet these ideas were based on strong moral principles which no argument could shake. An idealist certainly, yet a pragmatist definitely. He was so sensitive to people and situations that he would immediately realise what approach was suitable. No high flying jargons, big platitudes or lofty sermons. Just plain and simple solutions to a problem. That is what readers will be able to realise from his articles. Sometimes witty, sometimes serious - all intended to inspire, never to harm.

Kersi was no epitome of a ruthless, hardened businessman. His first love was to do something for the underprivileged sections of society. Business was not his forte and was giving him less and less satisfaction. There was more to this short life than just earning money and he wanted to accomplish much in his lifetime. He was a true philanthropist giving to any needy person all he could without a superior air. He was careful to ensure that he gave to make the other happy without expecting or even allowing accolades of any form. No Bouquets, no photographs.

For him giving was from the heart even if it was difficult at times and he gave a large portion of his income to help a number of needy persons and dedicated organisations.

Kersi was a true friend with whom one could share joys and sorrows and be sure you were understood. He was extremely tolerant of ideas even if they were diametrically opposite to his. While he could sometimes vociferously, sometimes wittily stand up for his viewpoint, while appreciating the other had his own. But he never condemned or looked down on another for holding different opinions. It is no surprise that he had a wide circle of friends. Yet, close friends were very few - those whom he could share his thoughts and feelings with.

Kersi had a wonderful ability of putting the other person at ease. He was happiest in the company of children. He could come to their level in no time. In fact his little friends always believed he was one of them!

Today some of those little friends are in their teens or nearing adulthood and look back fondly and nostalgically to the times their best friend came around to play with them, telling them stories, indulging their pranks and teaching them new pranks to the complete horror of the beholding parents.

What would best describe Kersi? Super being he never aspired to be. A wonderful human being he certainly was. Although 6 years have passed by it is still difficult to forget him and all his endearing ways and what he stood for.

"Life is too short" were indeed prophetic words for him.

Avi Sabavala



The Bright Magic

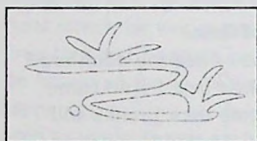
When I think of Kersi, the first word that comes to my mind is – “Mood elevator”. Yes, this is what he was to all of us in our dingy, dark, dilapidated NBA office in Dandia Bazar, Baroda. His arrival magically changed our low moods to that of joy and fun. The serious and tense atmosphere in the office would magically change and life would seem so much brighter and the struggle more hopeful of getting results.

The next word that comes to my mind on thinking of him is “Guardian- a care taker”. He was the guardian and caretaker of our office without exercising any authority what so ever. He just gave. NBA has always been functioning hand to mouth but in those days the situation was worse. Kersi but made things easier.

We just had to ask for a thing or express our need and there it would be arranged. He never let us feel deprived of anything.

To be a part of NBA in Gujarat, being a Gujarati, was a very difficult thing at that time. His complete devotion to the cause and a public stand, made it possible for us to move on with our activities even in Gujarat with zeal. His support and courage gave us so much strength to not just fight but fight with humor. His untimely death was a great blow to the NBA and its work in Gujarat. Had he been with us all these years, we would have grown much more in most adverse of circumstances not just as a movement but I would have grown into better individuals too.

Nandini Oza



PART II

Following are a few of the articles and essays that Kersi penned. They give an idea of the wide range and depth of his reading, his views on issues, what his philosophy was and how he expressed it.

PART II

DAMS AND DESERTS

The adverse effects of the large dams like Sardar Sarovar are experienced not only on the submergence and catchment areas of the valley but also on the downstream, like sea ingress desertification. Kersi sites the experiences around the world and in Gujarat and analyses the reality of Sardar Sarovar. As late as 1990, the planners had not taken the downstream impact of the project into account.

One argument employed to appeal to the common sense in favour of the Narmada Valley Project is that we cannot afford to lose the precious Narmada waters to the sea; and that this “waste” must be arrested. But like all other views of nature that measure its utility in terms of needs, this too is equally misleading. The February 1992 issue of the National Geographic magazine has carried the story of the Aral Sea in the USSR highlighting the consequence of diverting two large rivers and its effects on the people of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This is not an exact parallel of the situation where a river flowing into an unbounded sea is damned to divert its waters. But it is a most compelling example of what could happen when a natural water system that has existed over thousands of years is tampered with.

Fed by two of the Soviet Union's largest rivers, Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the Aral was the second largest land bound sea in the world. After the Revolution, enthusiastic planners became obsessed with the idea of irrigating vast planes from these rivers to produce cotton. In 1937 the country became an exporter of what was then called white gold. The depletion of the sea had begun but it was only after the longest canal carrying waters of Amu Darya became operational in 1956 that the true scale of the disaster began to be felt. The Aral has lost 40% of its area which has become an immense desert of 28,000 square km. A visiting expert on Aral from the U.S. concluded that there never was an environmental problem of this magnitude affecting some 35 million people.

The fishing port of Mynak where thousands of fishermen once lived now stands in the desert with the nearest sea 30 kms away. Dust and salt fly so densely in the air “that people feel salt on their lips all the time. It's getting hard to even open your eyes here”. Every year about 43 million tons of salt grit is estimated to be carried by the wind from the new born desert into the deep interior of the country, as far away as the Soviet coast of the Arctic.

In many unforeseen ways populations in the region are reeling under the throes of the dying sea. Cancer, respiratory diseases, infant mortality have soared; drinking water has become highly polluted due to saline dust blowing from the dry sea bed;

fish, animals and birds have disappeared. The weather has changed with temperatures swinging to extremes.

On the "benefit" side, growing of cotton with the canal waters is reaching a sort of a dead end. The earth has become so saturated with pesticides that nothing else can grow. To keep up the yields the farmers are employing all possible means including use of some banned chemicals.

So repentant and desperate the experts have become that they are now seeking ways to re-divert the water used for irrigation back into the sea. They are even toying with the idea of having a canal from a river in Siberia 2200 kms away just to feed the Aral. But in the USSR, partly due to lessons learnt from this self-inflicted tragedy, the opposition to diverting river waters is growing.

The Aral is a landlocked sea whereas the Narmada pours itself into a part connected with the Arabian Sea. But nature cannot be expected to educate us with an enactment of two exactly identical situations. With a little imagination we can take a hint from similarities. Narmada, like Amu Darya, is a big river and the dam across is planned to divert the water through a gigantic canal. The similarity therefore lies in the great quantity of fresh water forced to change its course. Downstream from the dam, over a region stretching almost 200 kms to the sea, the river water will lose its presence and influence. It is not difficult to realise that this part of the land and of the entire shore where the fresh water mixes with the sea will alter for the worse.

We have several examples where the volume of fresh water involved is very little as compared to the 40,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) to be diverted from the Narmada by the Sardar Sarovar dam, but nonetheless the consequences have been grave.

Many rivers in Gujarat which are dried up due to reduced rainfall and those that have dams across, have their own deserts spread on the shores. Mahi, a dammed river much smaller than Narmada, meets the sea at Kavi, 25 km from Dabka, a picturesque town of around 12,000 people on the river bank. Whatever little water now flows into the sea is not enough to keep it from injecting the land with increasing salinity. The effect of this is being felt as far away as at Dabka which is fast becoming polluted with salinity. Near Dabka is Sultanpura, a little village closer to the sea by 2 kms. Only a few years ago all its wells had sweet water. Now many have salinity and the water is not always drinkable. Close to Sultanpura is Mohmadpura where all the wells have become useless. Three years ago a special well was dug at Dabka with a pipeline to feed Mohmadpura, but within months from this well too water was found unfit for drinking. Now, further inland at Narsipura, another well is being dug

with an additional pipeline. This clearly shows that with the receding of fresh waters from near the shore and the river, the underground rivulets have either dried up or become polluted with seawater.

In addition to the waters turning saline, there has been a change in the landscape according to the old people here. The course of the river, once rich with dense vegetation on both sides, has been reduced to a mere trickle in the mounds of sand. The map of this region shows a wide blue river opening out near Dabka, while in reality it is more sand than water. This is so upto a distance of 25 kms, upto the port of Kavi, where not very long ago, the sea was perhaps kept in check by a wide flowing Mahi.

In Gujarat the most famous case of the adverse impact of a dam on the downstream areas is that of the Dantiwada dam on the river Banas. Originating in Rajasthan, Banas flows westward through the plains of North Gujarat. Before the dam was built the river carried on its course right into the sands of Kutch, but now with a dam upstream about 100 kms away at Dantiwada, nearly 150 villages have been deprived of its water. The ridiculous part of this sordid drama is that the number of people deprived of the river water downstream exceed those who have benefited upstream.

The really damaging aspect however is the effect on the region which earlier used to receive some of the river water. The river, at least in monsoon, greened a considerable area deep into the sands of Kutch, which now has merged with the desert. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Dantiwada dam has obliged the advancing desert.

The environmental issues involved in an incomparably bigger project like the Narmada are beyond human comprehension. The large portion of the valley with its vast variety of flora and fauna to be submerged and the even greater areas surrounding it, the areas downstream and the lands to be irrigated with canals constitute the impact areas that are too vast for any survey, let alone a compensatory action.

We cannot even visualise how the existing natural system will respond to the damming of the Narmada. We do not know how long a little desert takes to grow into a big one, and how it could affect life connected with it in various ways. We simply do not know all the vital factors.

SARDAR SAROVAR: WILL IT BE ANY DIFFERENT?

Sardar Sarovar is not much different from any previous project in alienating those it is going to affect the most. And for this very reason whatever corrective action is taken for the environment is bound to fail.

Through his article, "Do not always Damn the Dams" Mr. B.G.Varghese has expressed the hope that if the environment can be taken care of, then a project like the Sardar Sarovar could prove to be a great boon. In support he has cited the example of the Aswan Dam in Egypt. But the truth is that the opinion is still sharply divided over its overall impact.

For over six thousand years people of the Nile River Valley had been cultivating corn and other traditional crops. Surface irrigation with the dammed waters aided by pesticides and fertilisers have affected the land's fertility. Sayyid Marie, for many years Minister of agriculture, and later Chairman of the World Food Conference (1974) expressed his fears to the Egyptian parliament in these words, "I say in all candour, as loudly as possible, I am worried, extremely worried, because of the threat to the fertility of our soils". A Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) study vindicated this fear when it found that more than one third of Egypt's agricultural land is afflicted with salinity and almost 90% by waterlogging. The Nile Delta, one of the richest in the world, is also reported to be affected by sea ingress due to reduced water and silt flow from the river.

In any case, whether a dam in Egypt has done good or bad should not form the basis of being optimistic about a project like the SSP. We already have more than thirty years of experience with big dam building and its impact on environment and affected people. An objective look at some specific issues can tell us a good deal about what is most likely to happen in the case of the Narmada Valley Projects in general and Sardar Sarovar in particular.

The useful life of any dam is dependent on the rate at which the silt blocked by its wall fills up the reservoir. Every single dam in the country without exception has siltation rates far higher than assumed. In 1983 the Public Account Committee acknowledged this unpalatable truth: "In India on a rough estimate we are losing a staggering two million acre-feet (2 MAF) life storage capacity annually in our major and medium dams, corresponding to a loss of seven lakh (7,00,000) acres of irrigation potential every year..."

What has gone wrong is that the catchment areas on the periphery of the reservoirs have not been taken care of. Larger the reservoir greater the problem of treating these to ensure that the reservoir does not become useless before long.

In the case of the Narmada Project also the situation is not likely to be any different. Catchment area treatment (CAT) was one of the vital preconditions for the SSP. According to the guidelines of the Department of Environment & Forests the reservoir must not be filled until 100% CAT were completed. As of today no one has any idea how much this may cost. The World Bank in one of its Memorandum of 1990 hinted at a figure of one billion dollars. The problem of how and of which part of the area to treat still remains unresolved. The Narmada Control Authority has acknowledged that the cost of treating the whole of the catchment area would make the project unviable. It has therefore decided that only the "directly draining areas" will be treated. This, according to the DOEF, is an unacceptable compromise.

Tall claims of environmental measures continue to be made by the Gujarat government. For example it claims that the studies being conducted in Gujarat for achieving proper catchment and treatment are well advanced. Even if this were indeed so it do not imply an improvement in the situation. More than 90 % of the catchment area supposed to be treated is outside Gujarat and well beyond the scope of studies being carried out at present. The Gujarat government is cleverly making use of the work of the researchers engaged in this exercise to impress upon the public that catchment area treatment of Sardar Sarovar is being taken care of.

The CAT however is only one of the many vital environmental aspects of the projects. The others are command area development, upstream and downstream impact analysis and corresponding ameliorative actions. Even the basic studies on any of these have not been completed yet.

Whatever analysis of command areas has been done so far suggests some disturbing possibilities. For example, a large portion of the Bharuch district command area is reported to be "supercritical" from the irrigation viewpoint. These are areas closer to the sea which are already highly saline and surface irrigation will ruin them further. But just as the dam continues to be built without any possibility of proper catchment area treatment. Some of the largest sugar factory complexes are planned in this region with no regard to what canal irrigation will do to the soil. (The water requirement for sugarcane is five to six times higher than normal crops.) Just as in other big dam projects it is the same cash crop thinking which is dominating here: *CASH IS PRIMARY, SOIL IS SECONDARY*.

The risk of waterlogging in the command areas suitable for agriculture is also as high in any other project. Of the total supply of water for irrigation in these areas ground water forms a substantial part. Withdrawal of ground water in right proportion is supposed to reduce the chance of waterlogging. But for this a vast number of pump sets will be needed with power requirement far in excess of what is really possible.

As for the upstream and downstream effects, no comprehensive impact analysis has been attempted. The oft repeated statement that the forest which is going to be submerged is a degraded one hides the fact that it was because of the dam coming up in decades back. And in any case it is only on the right bank- nearer to the dam- that the forest is sparse. It is much better as you go farther away from the dam.

The issue of environment is not separable from that of displacement and rehabilitation of the affected people. To protect the reservoir from heavy siltation, co-operation of the people living upon its periphery will be indispensable. But even without informing in advance and without any kind of talk about compensation, lands in a number of villages are being marked for catchment area development. The villagers are opposing this by whatever means they can.

In Taloda, Maharashtra, an attempt is being made to resettle some oustees on lands which are already being cultivated by other tribals who have nothing else to depend on. The list of such conflicts is very long...

While it would be naive to hope that environment will be taken care of, it would be downright reckless to presume that people affected by the SSP also will be rehabilitated as they should be. The narrow definition of the PAP (Project Affected People) itself leaves out about half of the total number. This because only those to be affected by the submergence are considered affected by the project.

Until recently the government did not even think it necessary to carry out a survey of people to be affected by the massive network of canals. It was only under pressure from the World Bank that some experts from the Indian Institute of Management were engaged to determine how many would be affected by the canal network. The findings were so alarming that the government had to first suppress it and later disown it. The Independent Review team appointed by the World Bank did its own survey and concluded that about one and a half lakh landholders will be affected by the canals and of whom about twelve hundred families will become landless and six thousand left with less than one hectare of land.

Even for the officially recognised PAPs the rehabilitation policy is not uniform. Only in Gujarat the landless encroaches and major sons are entitled to rehabilitation benefits. In Maharashtra and MP they are not, which leaves out as many as 60% of the affected people in the submergence.

The state government in Gujarat with help of a few NGO is able to project an active process of rehabilitation. But out of more than one hundred and fifty resettlement sites created for resettling about twenty villages there are a few where one can see

irrigated land, fairly good houses and the oustees being looked after by an NGO. But even here there are acute problems of fuel wood and lack of grazing land for cattle. At most of the resettlement sites one can see the disintegration of families, bad uncultivable land, lack of basic amenities and in general, uncertainty about the future.

As in all other projects the concentration is on the engineering works. In a very real sense this is the easier part of the project, consisting of floating the tenders, allocating funds and supervising the work. Considerations for the human and environmental aspects of the massive undertaking are at best in a state of infancy. The truth therefore is that Sardar Sarovar is not much different from any previous project in alienating those it is going to affect the most. And for this very reason whatever corrective action is taken for the environment is bound to fail.

If this is the situation with what has been called the most studied project in the country what is the status of the others planned on the Narmada? Recently the Madhya Pradesh government has awarded the contract to build the Narmada Sagar dam. The Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal Award of 1979 had categorically stated that both the SSP and NSP should be built at the same time. The reason for this is that one important function of NSP is to regulate the supply of the stored water to the SSP. About 17% of SSP benefits are dependent on the NSP which will supply its stored water at a controlled rate to the Sardar Sarovar. Gujarat therefore has to bear 17% of the cost of NSP.

It is the figures and percentages, cost-benefit ratios and power in megawatts, which are uppermost in the minds of the decision makers. The rest is nuisance. The Narmada Sagar Project symbolises this folly as nothing else can. The official figure of what the NSP will do on its own are truly frightening. This dam will submerge forty five thousand hectares of rich forest and about the same area of what has been called one of the most fertile patches of lands in the whole of Asia. Two hundred and fifty four villages will be directly affected ousting more than one hundred and fifty thousand people. Against ninety thousand hectares of extremely good lands that it will submerge, it will irrigate one hundred and twenty thousand hectares, if ever.

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A BEND IN THE NARMADA TURMOIL

Struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) has entered in the new phase after the historic Jan Vikas Sangharsha Yatra that was concluded in January 1991. These are some of the glimpses of the post-Yatra process in the Andolan, by a conscious chronicler. The description of this small slice of time also analyses the larger issues.

When the thirty six day long rally of the villagers to be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar dam was withdrawn on the 30th of January, there appeared to be no concrete gain from this largest demonstration ever of people to be displaced by a single project. However, the activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan maintained that the Sangharsha Yatra was not a futile exercise. The movement against the Narmada Valley Project, according to them, had entered a new phase with an increased feeling of solidarity among all the affected people of the valley, and that the villagers had returned with a resolve to fight it out from their own soil.

Some recent events indicate that the new phase of the movement is not a figment of an idealist's imagination. In February, a large number of villages in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh successfully boycotted the census operations because in the past it was used as a substitute for the survey of people to be displaced.

The villagers have formed their own groups called Van Rakshak Dal to look after their forests. One Conservator of Forests was asked to go back and not worry about the trees in the area. To the villagers' surprise, he appreciated their determination to protect the forest and has not returned since then.

At Kasarwad where Baba Amte has his base, people have for two years successfully opposed the construction of a bridge across the Narmada. The existing bridge, some 5 km. downstream, is to be submerged. Gammon India, the company which has taken the contract, has been sanctioned an additional 2 crores over the old estimate of 6 crores, but it does not look likely that they will be able to begin the work with the locals poised strongly against it with a renewed oath of not allowing its construction.

But it was an episode at Bamni, slated to be the first of the Maharashtra villages to be submerged by the SSP, which got the maximum publicity in Gujarat. The information department issued a press note accusing the tribals of resorting to violence with backing from the activists. It seems what happened here was a culmination of several factors. The survey team headed by the Additional Collector from Dhule and the Deputy Collector were not the first team of the surveyors to determine the number of households to be displaced. Earlier there were as many as six surveys carried out. That none of it was performed with the seriousness it merited is clear from the glaring discrepancies between the official figures and those of an independent survey carried out by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

Now, a govt. official operating in the rural areas without extracting bribes would be the rarest of wonders. In Gujarat also, at all the places affected by the main canal the villagers complain that the 'sahebs' who had come for assessing the worth of their houses, lands and well etc. had invariably asked for bribes. Hence the tribals' allegation that a talati had taken money from them sounds more like a statement of fact.

Resistance and Non Violence.

Medha Patkar, with two of her colleagues, were discussing the agenda of the next meetings with the villagers. Unknown to them, the Deputy Collector was forced to trek from Sinduri, a neighbouring village, to the place of the meeting where the Additional Collector had also arrived. There was some rough talk to them in presence of the activists, which must have been a unique experience for the officials. As a wedding ceremony was in progress in the village, some of the tribals were perhaps drunk, and some were carrying their traditional weapons which is not surprising. What is surprising is that such an encounter, or even some rough handling of an official by an angry tribal, should be interpreted as the tribals turning violent. More ridiculous was the allegation that the activists encouraged violence.

Whatever genuine support and sympathy the movement against the Narmada Valley Project has generated throughout the country, has mainly been due to its commitment to non-violence means. Had there been the slightest doubt about the nature of the struggle, a person like Amte would never have allowed himself to be so closely associated with it. To encourage violence in any form would be suicidal for the movement.

The report in one local paper of what happened at Bamni reminded me of a photograph of a tribal with bow and arrow which had appeared during the month long rally. The caption read, 'Fierce Tribal Getting ready to Fight;.

The convenient tendency of looking upon the tribals as if they were less than human and uncivilised is as old as the rivers they live by. Their existence, or rather now their struggle for survival, has been of little significance to us. Their presence is recorded only when we have to invade their habitats to acquire it for what we call development.. For the state machinery they become an irritant and a hurdle to be overcome when its planners come up with designs for a dam or a power plant.

If we accept the tribal communities as a class of people living off the lands, forests and rivers for ages, the obvious question is what are the provisions made to safeguard their common interests. The laws of the land no doubt make a lofty reading with special provisions for the socially oppressed and neglected communities. As recently as 1974 a resolution was passed which acknowledged the tribal living in a forest as its rightful owner. But in practice the violations of all such provisions on paper has no parallel.

Can a tribal engaged directly by a government department or by a contractor ever hope to get the minimum wage? If maimed or sick, can he ever get timely and proper treatment? And when plans are made for creating a wildlife sanctuary surrounding the tribal villages is it necessary to consult them? Absolutely out of the question.

The irrational and inhuman conception about a whole class of people and our usurping of their resources, forms a vicious circle with one wrong perpetuating the other. For the tribal communities, the state bureaucracy and the power it enjoys could be said to be a greater curse than was perhaps the British rule. The description of state power by a 19th century thinker as "... the most flagrant, the most cynical, and the most complete negation of humanity..." sounds very apt where the tribals are concerned.

So if we believe that it would be good for all the tribal communities to come together and evaluate their present state, and form a sufficiently strong and united representation, another obvious question would be where tribals fit in with the irrigation schemes like the SSP. If the past experience of the tribals with the irrigation schemes were to be a deciding factor, then there cannot be the slightest doubt that the Narmada Valley Project would ignite unprecedented opposition with an unambiguous political message. Irrigation dams, built for irrigation, power generation and water supply to towns and cities have never had any consideration for the needs of the tribals who must be displaced. And large projects do not just cause displacement but also destroy a natural environment - the forest and its flora and fauna. The great rally at Harsud in '89 was, in fact, a live demonstration of how the tribals, with fullest justification, perceive a project like the Narmada.

Not many people know that in Gujarat there have been some very fierce struggles staged by the tribal organisations for their right over the natural resources. As an example we can take the case of some 5000 tribals displaced by the Dharoi dam in Sabarkantha (N.Gujarat) who were not paid any compensation. One summer when the reservoir dried up, they returned to make use of the fertile earth behind the dam wall. But they found a Patel had acquired legal rights over even that piece of land. When they were reduced to total dependence on forest lands, they were fined by the forest officials. And when unable to pay, were often beaten up by the police.

Fortunately, a small voluntary organisation led by an enlightened farmer helped them to organise and protest effectively. They sent an ultimatum to the forest officials and the police to stop visiting their areas, and seized back the land used by the powerful landlord.

Last August 1990, a meeting, organised by the NBA activists at Dharampur in South Gujarat, was attended by two thousand tribals of the region under heavy

rains. As they were engaged in a battle against a dam to be built, they could immediately grasp what was at stake in the case of the Narmada Project. At the end of the meeting their vocal denouncement of it was reminiscent of the militancy of the affected in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

More recently, (after the winding up of the Sangharsh Yatra) representatives of the thousands of the tribals and small farmers displaced by the Kadana dam, made a statement saying that they would like to present a case in UN because their fundamental rights were violated. They also sent a letter the NBA expressing their full support and requesting guidance in their struggle for adequate compensation.

It would be quite an understatement to say that everywhere the tribals have had more than sufficient reason to react unfavourably to whatever the state may plan to do on their lands.

In the case of the Sardar Sarovar, the issue of the rights of the tribals goes well beyond the right over a piece of land. Never before has a single project threatened to drown such a large number of tribal villages, destroy its lands and natural resources, with incalculable indirect effects. The areas of impact are scattered over several hundred square kms. In the reservoir zone stretching almost upto 250 kms of the valley (248 villages in all), the dam site and its periphery covering some twenty villages, thirty thousand hectares of land is to be acquired and dug up for the canal network. Lands are also being acquired for rehabilitation, uprooting the landless tillers, and additionally about hundred villages would also be affected by a proposed wild life sanctuary. The overwhelming majority of the people to be affected are tribals and marginal farmers.

The struggle of any of the affected tribals therefore cannot be viewed in isolation as if they were a few villages where people have been led to believe differently from the rest. So far the protests opposing the project have risen from the villages of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. There have been countless rallies and demonstrations by thousands of wouldbe oustees of the valley. Their demand to scrap the project altogether is based on the conviction that displacement is an unjustifiable sacrifice demanded of them. They are aware of the condition of the people ousted by other dams like Bargi and Tawa and see no reason to believe that things would work out any better in the case of Sardar Sarovar and Narmada Sagar.

In Gujarat, Kevadia and its surrounding villages have been for years demanding the status of the project affected people. because their lands were acquired for the project nearly three decades ago. At least two Chief Ministers in the past have assured them that their demand would be fulfilled.

The villages where people have lost lands at throwaway rates because of the canal, are finding it difficult to make their voice heard. The silence of their submission has in a way, contributed to the official claim that the project has total support and approval in Gujarat. The truth however, is that the cacophony of the propaganda for the SSP and the massive nature of work in progress have cowed them down.

But as more than 90 % of the people to be displaced from the valley are in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the decision of many of these villages to refuse to cooperate with any work connected with the project is a very significant. Project officials and contractors activity is most likely to inspire torment in the valley. It is relevant to remember here that so far, both in M.P. and Maharashtra, a proper survey of people to be displaced has not been carried out. With the declaration of no co-operation to the project related work this has become an impossibility.

Now if we assume, that such a cry for preserving the village as it exists becomes really widespread, it would put the voluntary agencies helping the state government in the task of rehabilitation in a moral dilemma. For them, as well as for the Gandhians who support the project, it would not be possible to ignore the contradiction of what is inherent in a project like the SSP and the democratic right of the tribals as citizens of the country, as a class of people, to decide their own future with dignity. The attempts to do justice by following the definition of the Project Affected People may then appear to be no more than a blinkered and localised exercise to placate one's conscience.

In absence of a strong and united representation of the tribal communities on a national level, it has become possible for the supporters of the project to ignore the true scale of the impact and its long term consequences which are full of frightful uncertainties.

There is a great chasm between the provisions made on paper for proper rehabilitation and what seems possible in reality. The official claim is that about two thousand families have already been resettled. The people so far rehabilitated are mostly from a few of the 19 villages of Gujarat. But the fact remains that even after several years of efforts and pressure from the World Bank and the NGOs, not a single village has been fully resettled. This fact alone should serve as realistic pointer on the possibility of rehabilitation of all the recognised oustees.

Even those who have been given the promised land of five acres are facing unending problems. The pasture required for the cattle is either not there or is most inadequate. The much trumpeted facilities like schools and clinics are nowhere in sight. At many sites the oustees have been stranded in transit camps for as long as two years and there is a great feeling of resentment due to the lack of basic amenities. The primary condition of resettling the village as a village has been violated, and families have been split into many parts.

For anyone to believe therefore that a just rehabilitation even for the officially recognised affected people is possible would be wishful thinking for the love of the SSP.

In short, the argument that in the case of the Sardar Sarovar, the tribals and the others affected are going to be well taken care of, is not likely to convince a panel of representatives who are genuinely concerned about the fate of their tribal communities. They would need to be at least as self-serving and indifferent as our politicians, to be able to tell all the tribal villages, that for them the Narmada Project is a good thing going.

It must be conceded that a well-knit, united and effective platform representing the tribals' interests, is a hypothesis far removed from reality. But it is this fact alone which can explain why it has become possible for the supporters of the project to brush aside some of the most crucial questions directly related to it.

Questions such as:

How and when can the two hundred and forty eight villages be rehabilitated, especially when the majority of them have vowed never to move, and after years of efforts not a single one of those not opposing the project, has been fully resettled?

What if political pressure is exerted to speed up the work on the Narmada Sagar Project, designed to drown another 254 villages? Is that too to be viewed in isolation as a problem to be tackled by a different set of officials supported by some other NGOs?

Should a project like the Narmada Sagar be supported when it is meant to submerge some of the richest forests and fertile lands in the country about equal in area to the lands it is supposed to irrigate? (Technically the Narmada Sagar is linked to the SSP as almost 20% of the latter's benefits, are dependent on it)

Shouldn't the definition of the affected people be extended to cover those affected by the canal network, and the landless tillers who are uprooted by the wholesale purchase of lands for resettling the recognised oustees and of course the villages near Kevadia, where lands were acquired thirty years ago for the project?

Not burdened by such considerations, the support to the SSP by almost everyone who matters socially or politically in Gujarat, makes it impossible to have an unbiased and holistic assessment of the impact of the project on the tribals and the marginal farmers. At the same time any effort at uniting the tribal organisations on a common platform will have to reckon with a deity called the SSP. It is not surprising that a number of dedicated activists working for the upliftment of the tribals in Gujarat are not able to voice their views freely on the Narmada Project.



Irony In Gujarat.

An irony among the many ironies found in the status the SSP enjoys in Gujarat is, that among the very staunch supporters of the project are a few of the most respected social activists who have in their own areas fought against dams for one reason or the other. Take Mr. Harivallabh Parikh for instance, who runs a tribal welfare ashram near Chhota Udepur. Some years ago a dam was planned across Heran, a small river, which would have submerged his ashram. Mr. Parikh, with his fame and well established political connections, could have got any compensation package he liked for relocating his ashram. But he fought against the project and after personal pleadings with Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi, he had it shelved. He happens to be one of the well known champions of the SSP.

But even in such an atmosphere of deity worship in Gujarat, there are several groups and individuals who believe that there is a need for greater openness about the whole scheme and that the last word has still not been said. Recently, Bhoomiputra, the highly respected fortnightly, which is also a mouthpiece of the Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal, carried in its four issues, views of Babubhai Patel, the Narmada Development Minister, and also of the NBA. There have been a few meetings of the activists with some leading citizen of Baroda, Surat and Ahmedabad and from the Andolan's point of view the response was far from discouraging.

The feeling of the common man in the state for the project is the result of years of expectations roused to higher and higher pitch by the politicians, and of course, the vernacular press. The NBA has realised that almost as important as anything is the need to carry its views to the people of Gujarat. The biggest hurdle in this vital and sensitive task is the blanket ban imposed by the Gujarati press on views unflattering to the project. And hence at the moment, meetings with voluntary groups, trade unions, and influential citizens, seems to be the only way out, apart from an occasional opportunity provided by a journal like Bhoomiputra.

A movement of non co-operation with the project related work is not likely to shake the state government, but it is sure to indirectly convey the demand for a comprehensive review of their entire Narmada Valley Project more effectively than ever before. The popular mood in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra has never been too enthusiastic about either the SSP or the NSP, and it is possible that increasing public sympathy for the people in the valley may become a matter of political consideration.

A peaceful and non-violent blockage of project officials will have its own risks of falling into traps meant to provoke aggression which could be used as an excuse for the use of force by the state machinery. But from what it has achieved

so far the Andolan can be said to have the potential to successfully sustain its campaign of peaceful non co-operation. In its areas of influence, which is spread over a large number of villages in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, it has instilled a sense of dignity among the people to be displaced.

In many villages people have vowed to do away social evils like drinking and gambling. One very heartening aspect of their unity against the threat of displacement is that divisions on the basis of caste and religion have become diluted. The most outstanding feature of the movement, however, is the very active participation of women in the villages. Indeed, in many villages their presence seems to dominate the meetings where future plans for the struggle are discussed. Just as in the Chipko movement, their sensitivity seems to be have added a religious fever to the struggle to save their lands and river.

It cannot be denied that the movement has the ingredients, which could make peaceful non co-operation with what it thinks wrong and unjust, to be a moral force. A good many of the leading activists are those who have given up their promising careers in the cities and have taken to a Spartan living at no more than Rs. 400 a month. As the villagers can see such devotion to their cause with no personal ambition of any kind, they are moved to put in their extra bit. One may not always agree with the strategy of the activists in dealing with a particular situation, but considering the few options that they have had, their achievement of raising the protest against the project to the present level must be considered quite unique.

So far the clashes with the state machinery have been confined to a few arrests, some beating up of the protesting villagers, including women, and cooked up charges of inciting violence. But a sizeable section of the administration in Madhya Pradesh, it seems, has realised that the Narmada Bachao Andolan is a people's movement for a very just cause, and what is really at stake was not foreseen by any government. Whether in response to the new phase of the movement such a view gains ground or not remains to be seen.

On the other side, far away from the hamlets that have woken up to the call of the struggle to save the valley, thousands of tons of cement is poured every day to speed up the construction of the dam. But if the movement of non co-operation to the project does become widespread in the villages, then for everyone, including those who have so far remained aloof, there will be only two options: Silence in the case of a crackdown on the villages which refuse to fall in line, or support to its inhabitants who have taken to heart the slogan, "*Hamare Guon Mein Hamara Raj*" (In Our Village Only We Shall Rule).

FUNDING THE SSP: LET THE FIGURES SPEAK

This article was written at a time when the World Bank was very much in the Sardar Sarovar Project. Even at that time the project was economically unviable.

FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY MILLION DOLLARS is an enormous sum of money by any standard. At the current exchange rate it works out to be one thousand crores of rupees - more the half of Gujarat's budget. With this you can build two thousand well-equipped medical clinics for the rural areas and also take care of the salaries of its staff. Or say, four thousand primary schools with full facilities. This is the amount the World Bank has so far assured the government for the Sardar Sarovar Project. This aid, massive as it is in absolute value, is indeed puny when measured against the funding required for completing the SSP.

For many years, the State government has been after the World Bank to get as much as possible for the SSP. So aggressive has been the campaign for the project that almost two years before the Planning Commission granted its conditional clearance in 1987, the Bank had agreed to partly fund the project.

In addition to the actual funding, the World Bank's participation was considered essential for the credibility it would grant the venture. The other aid and bilateral assistance from abroad would naturally depend on what the World Bank thought of the project. The state government therefore agreed to whatever conditions the World Bank imposed. But with the rise of agitation by the people affected by the project in the Narmada Valley, it became obvious that at least where rehabilitation of the affected people was concerned the situation was far from what the government claimed. The Bank therefore appointed a team of independent experts, who after a nine-month long study condemned the project as basically flawed and urged that it be reconsidered. This put the Bank in a fix and its executive directors decided to continue funding only up to a six month long deadline for meeting the conditions related to rehabilitation and environmental aspects.

Recently an article by Mr. Manas Das Gupta reported that the Gujarat government is seriously thinking of withdrawing its application for further loans from the World Bank. The report went on to assert that the state government was confident of raising the required funding without the WB loans which in any case would not amount to more than 15% of the total project cost. Such bold statements are no doubt the outcome of the further conditional extension

granted by the WB. The CM had strongly reacted to the wording of the relieve granted by the Bank after almost all the major donor countries voted against continuation of funding of SSP.

The efficiency of water delivery has very rarely exceeded 35% anywhere in the country. But for the Sardar Sarovar it is assumed to be as high as 60%. Here is what the World Bank itself has said about the efficiency of water delivery in the India Irrigation Sector Review, 1991:

"... Most irrigation commands in India probably have an irrigation efficiency of 20 to 35%. If assumed efficiency is 60% and actual is 30%, actual water availability would be half of the assumption..."

It is not difficult to imagine what happens to the distant, really needy areas if the assumed value is not achieved.

The above figures are enough to outline the extraordinarily wishful thinking with which the SSP has been packaged. For obvious reasons, these figures are completely ignored while assuring the people of the state that somehow, even if the World Bank withdraws, the necessary funds will be managed.

The schemes completed without the World Bank aid have produced better results. But this fact is of no relevance to the SSP because of the sheer scale of the project. For example, the canal network, totalling a staggering 75,000 kilometres in length is going to involve 19 major river crossings and something like 250 road and rail crossings. But more importantly, the project has an incomparably large component of work related to rehabilitation of the affected people and of measures for the environment.

In his recent announcement, the CM has presented a scheme of collecting Rs. 1000 per acre from the farmers who are going to benefit from the project and thereby raising 450 crores. This proposal seem completely oblivious to the past experience of collecting even the interest on the loans the farmers have availed from banks and the crores of rupees of unpaid electricity bills.

Yet let us assume that 450 crores are possible to raise at a rate of Rs. 1000 per acre. How significant is this amount? It is no more equivalent to 6 months work even if the progress is made as per the official schedule. A better way of placing this in proper perspective is to look at the cost of providing irrigation through canals. Since Independence the average has come out to be about 80,000 per acre.

In the case of SSP, 45 lakh acres is to be irrigated from a moderate estimate of 12,000 crores means Rs.25,000 per acre will be the cost for providing irrigation, or 25 times higher than what the CM hopes to collect from the beneficiary farmers. But as we have seen, there are compelling reasons for the final cost to be much, much higher than this.

One therefore does not have to have a PhD. in Economics to assess that the possibility of raising funds locally for this scheme is just as remote as the Narmada waters for Kutch. Gujarat already has a taxation level that is among the highest in the country. Nearly four years of mobilising funds for the SSP by way of deposits has yielded not even 50 crores. Already the state finds itself in a deep financial crisis.

Still less probable is the scenario of the NRI's coming to bail the SSP out. Most of these well-off well-wishers are shrewd men of business and are not likely to invest substantially without attractive returns. Many will be guided by what the World Bank decides.

The recent meeting of the World Bank Chief with the CM was widely reported and also that personally Mr. Preston is in favour of continuing the aid. And so, it is almost certain that the wooing of the Bank will continue as usual. Next year, sometime around April, the World Bank once again is going to see whether its norms related to the rehabilitation of the affected and for the environment have been met or not.

During his visit, Mr. Preston himself could have fulfilled a simple norm if he would have agreed to listen to the representatives of the majority of the affected people. But by refusing to meet them he has confirmed the suspicion of the people in the Narmada Valley that the World Bank is merely trying to wriggle out of the situation it has been out into by the Morse Report on the SSP. The frequent arrests of their representatives by the local police wherever they demonstrate is strongly indicative of the shape of events to come. When figures of any kind finally become irrelevant....

DESALINATION IN KUTCH? WHY NOT!

Quests for Alternatives for the SSP has been a subject of constant exploration by the opponents of the project. From 1988 onwards, number and such proposals, plans have been put forward by a number of experts, activists and organisations. Kersi's alternative has been a part of such a debate contributed by people in various walks of life.

In mathematics, a simple method is often used to understand the nature of a complex equation. This involves equating the variables of the equation to come realistic figures. Once you have the outcome of the operation you can get the feel of what you are dealing with.

This method can also be applied to any problem the solution of which lies in simple reasoning and not rhetoric. In Gujarat, Kutch has always been a district with a unique set of problems the central one being that it is a region perpetually in need of water. People are told that the only hope is a branch canal from the Sardar Sarovar dam, some five hundred km away. Unfortunately, the moment you put the realistic values of the variables in the problem called Kutchh, this politically propagated solution appears quite hopeless. When you consider the distance from the dam, the dependence on a number of factors, the experience with other irrigation schemes, you realise why some concerned Kutchhis have said that Kutchh has been used as "*Aveji nu Oont*" to justify the Narmada Project. "*Aveji nu Oont*" refers to a medieval practice adopted in warfare to smash the spiked gates of a castle by using the thrust of charging elephants. The *Oont* (a camel) was made to stand against the gate to act as cushion for the elephant's head...

The analogy to a mathematical equation while dealing with Kutchh is also easily justifiable if you believe that what Kutchh needs is a precise solution with no margin for error. To be able to obtain the most realistic solution in an acceptable timeframe, we must examine all the options.

By area, the largest district of the state and perhaps also of the country, Kutchh has a population of a little over a million. Rains have always been scarce, varying between 200mm to 400 mm. The underground water has gone too deep and there are no rivers which carry sufficient water. The politicians have succeeded in using these facts to justify the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam by saying that if the height is lowered by even an inch, the prospects of the Narmada waters ever reaching Kutchh would be doomed.

Rainwater is, of course, a vital factor, but it cannot be made to vary at will. The best we can do is to improve the degree of its utility which in fact a voluntary organisation

called the Vivekanand Research and Training Centre is doing. It has demonstrated that even in areas of very scarce rainfall it is possible to make the groundwater rise by developing watersheds, and by cleverly blocking the flowing away of rain water year after year to ensure that very little of it is lost. It is said that there is a complete blueprint for such management of water for a large area of Kutch which, if implemented, can almost put an end to the chronic scarcity of water to a very great extent. But equally important is the counter variable (or rather a constant) dictated by the state politicians who cannot recognise significance of schemes which cost in lakhs and not in hundreds of crores. So even with a solution that has proved highly successful we don't seem to be getting anywhere.

It is clear therefore that the solution must not only satisfy certain minimum requirement of the people of Kutch in a reasonable time, but meet with the approvals of the decision makers who have nothing really to do with Kutch...

Now suppose we reduce the problem to just the domestic needs of the million odd people of Kutchh. This can be construed as a step towards the solution of the bigger one, which is to free Kutchh from the spectre of droughts when even drinking water is a matter of great anxiety.

Kutchh has a long seashore and we can select an appropriate site from where desalinated water could made to reach the areas of scarcity. The very word, desalination, often attracts the dismissal that it is too costly to be practical. But as already, a project costing a few hundred crores is more likely to catch the fancy of our World Bank - conditioned planners. And so let us see what desalination of seawater for Kutch amounts to.

There are two major methods of desalination in practice. One is the thermal method of distillation and the other one that of reverse osmosis. A good many regions of the Middle East are dependent on desalinated sea water for their domestic needs. Seawater is not fit for drinking because it is full of dissolved impurities but which are left behind when it is boiled and pure water is collected by the process of distillation.

But distillation requires a lot of energy. First it is required to bring water to the boiling point and then to convert it into vapour. In fact, to obtain one litre of pure water by heating the seawater you would need more than one horsepower or about one rupee worth of electricity. This obviously is not a practical solution, something which even the Arabs with their own oil or gas will find difficult to accept (unless they are pressed to the extent the Kutchhis have been).

The answer to the high energy required for thermal desalination was found by looking for energy which was in any case going waste. When we cook anything on our stoves, more than 80% of the heat available from the flame is lost as waste heat

into the atmosphere. Similarly, when even a small plant operates by burning either coal or oil or gas, there is waste energy escaping*into the atmosphere, which is several thousand times more than that of waste heat from a stove. A desalination plant therefore could be attached to a power plant near the seashore and the waste heat from the power plant could be used for the process of distillation.

Thermal power plants with desalination plants attached to it are designed to operate at predetermined efficiency which is lower than actually possible. In simple terms this means that you sacrifice some output for the purpose of desalinising the seawater. The proportion of power and water is decided by the requirement of the region in which the plant is to be erected.

The utilisation of heat carried by the fuel gases from the power plants (waste heat) is of course most desirable, and on the face of it its use for distillation would seem to be the most economical way of generating pure water. But it turns out that for distilling a large quantity of sea water which would be the daily requirement of say a lakh of people, the energy required is too high, and you would need to sacrifice the efficiency of the plant to a great extent.

But fortunately for the countries which must deepened on distillation for its drinking water needs, Mr. R Silver, working for Weir Westgarth Ltd of Scotland, invented in 1957 a truly brilliant method of greatly reducing energy required for distilling huge quantity of sea water.

The scientific principle behind his design is taught in every high school: When distillation did take place by utilising the waste heat from the power plant it must have been cheered as good achievement. What was not immediately realised was that it still was an extremely wasteful process. Why? Because the energy put in for creating steam is lost in simple distillation as you do not recover it when it is released during the condensation of vapour back into the precious liquid we call drinking water.

MSF Process

What Mr. Silver did was to carry out distillation in stages, in such a way that the energy released by condensation was not lost but used to heat up the seawater in another chamber. Distillation process performed in a number of stages with effective utilisation of energy from condensation, or the MSF (Multi-Stage Flash Process) as this is called, has proved to be the most successful method of thermal desalination. In practise it has made it possible to reduce energy requirement by nearly ten times!

Suppose we have a moderate size 100 MW power plant (about equal to the one at Sabarmati in Ahmedabad) from which we use just 4 MW of power for the purpose of desalination, it is possible to supply 20 million litres of fresh water per day. Against this the power cost per unit will rise by just 4% as we are taking away 4% from its best

possible capacity. If this small rise in cost of power is recovered as water tax, or as surcharge from the users of electricity, water can be supplied absolutely free of cost for domestic need of about half the population of Kutchh. This is based on an assumption that the domestic need is about 50 liters per head per day. If a little austerity is observed in the months of acute scarcity, then a single plant can provide for the basic needs of the entire population of Kutchh. Or if you must supply 50 litres per head, then 8 MW would have to be used for desalination.

For the development of a region both water and power are necessary. If the scheme of a power plant coupled to a distillation unit is implemented at a selected site in Kutchh, it is not certain whether an investment of something like 300 crores at a time for a power plant coupled with desalinating facility, would find favour with those who are used to talking in terms of thousands of crores. One recent news item, however, declared that there is concrete plan to install two lignite based power stations of 200 MW each in Kutch. Let us hope that the possibility of generating fresh water through these would also be looked into.

Reverse Osmosis

Just like the multistage flash process we can tackle the problem of water scarcity in Kutchh in stages. Let us now see what the method of reverse osmosis has to offer.

Osmosis is a simple process Narmada which two liquids separated by a membrane flow into each other and thereby equalise the concentration of the salts and impurities they contain. The more concentrated liquid tends to become diluted while the dilute one gains in concentration. Now suppose is that the pure solvent passes through on to the other side leaving behind the dissolved impurities - which means the dilute liquid become even more dilute and the one having greater impurity becomes even more concentrated. For this there cannot be a better name than reverse osmosis.

The purity of the water available after its pressurised discharge through the membrane obviously depends on the porosity of the membrane. Modern reverse osmosis plants use membrane which can remove 99% of the salt (sodium chloride) from the sea water and make it potable. But what about the energy requirements? Theoretically, only about one horsepower would be required to convert 1000 litres of sea water into potable water. But in practise a lot of other factors come into play and power is required to overcome their resistance. For plants of fairly large sizes, about 7 to 8 hp would be needed to produce ten thousand litres of fresh water from sea. For plants, which are manufactured presently, we should assume 10 hp for 1000 litres.

Now to come the brass tacks where Kutchh is concerned: It works out that if we distribute four hundred RO desalination plants with each unit producing 5000 litres per hour, the cost comes to be roughly Rs.30 crores. Our fear would be that this is too low a figure to attract the ministers. So how does one make the scheme a costlier one?

Let us assume that the reason for not implementing the 30 crore scheme would be that sufficient power is not available to run so many RO plants. All the 40 plants located at selected places should need about 15 MW of electricity. Again, if instead of the seawater the saline underground water- which the people find unfit for drinking- is desalinated by the RO process, the energy requirement could be substantially reduced. In any case, considering that the scheme will deliver about 50 million litres of fresh water per day this should be considered quite acceptable. Even if it becomes necessary to install diesel generating sets for the RO plants in bunches, the total cost does not exceed Rs.50 crores.

But to return to economics of desalination by RO. Now suppose we are able to recover just two paise for each litre of water by way of tax or actual sale, the burden of power cost gets fully taken care of. To those who will grumble in protest, we must point out that even in areas of no scarcity water supply for both irrigation and domestic use is heavily subsidised. Yet if the water for domestic use must be supplied free of cost to the poor, even then it can be shown that the entire scheme can become self financing if an initial investment of say 100 crores is made exclusively for it. The fund left over after purchase of equipments could be invested with a minimum assured returns, part of energy cost could be covered from water tax from those who can afford it, power can be supplied a profit during those months when water from the plants is not required. To put investment of such a scale in proper perspective we can do no better than consider the amount already spent on the Sardar Sarovar Project. The Gujarat government proudly claims to have spent already around Rs.1500 crores. Now to be able to supply irrigation water to even the regions nearest to the dam, it will have to spend atleast another Rs 1000 crores. (This is based on the official deadline on beginning of irrigation by 1994). Now assume a simple interest of 14% on this sum - Rs. 350 crores every year - and words become redundant. Here while talking of investment let us not forget the public money that will be sunk in the construction of gigantic sugar factories being planned in the immediate command of the SSP. This will not just further tilt the investment against areas in most critical needs but will further reduce the slim possibility of the Narmada waters ever reaching Saurashtra and Kutch. One benefit will be that cultivation of sugar cane will give the English language a new phrase: SCP (Sugar Coated Project)

However, the most attractive part of the whole scheme is that it can be implemented in stages by investing say only 20 crores every year for 5 to 6 years and gradually covering all the scarcity hit areas of Kutchh. In short, it is quite possible that within a short period of 4 to 5 years, desalination can bring both water and power to Kutchh, in the proportion required for its healthy growth.

WHO PERPETUATES SCARCITY OF DRINKING WATER?

Mr. Ashraf Sayyad in his article on the water scarcity in Jamnagar (TOI of 24th) says that this region is perhaps the worst affected because of salinity of the underground water. If a solution is to be found to permanently relieve the people from the spectre of shortage of even drinking water, the first step must be to prepare a list of towns and villages in descending order of priority. No such drought-like situation the government spends crores of rupees for rushing water by tankers. It is possible that a great many villages with equally urgent need are left out of such temporary relief schemes.

Though at a number of places people in drought-prone regions have themselves solved the problem of water required for domestic use with help and guidance from some non-government bodies there is no interest shown by the elected elite to replicate such successes. The main reason for this is that the state government has only one police, which is by building dams.

No time is too long and no cost too big for the mantra of damming rivers. The followers of this policy say that there just cannot be a quicker and cheaper method. How wrong they are can be shown by considering a simple and proven method of providing drinking water for a region like Jamnagar.

Let us suppose that about 7 lakh people in and around Jamnagar city are in dire need of drinking water for all the twelve months of the year. They would need approximately 21 lakh litres of water for drinking per day. Now the best known method desalination is that of Reverse Osmosis, and a plant to produce 5000 litres of potable water per hour would cost about Rs.15 lakhs. This means that about twenty plants of this size could produce that required quantity of drinking water with an initial investment of about Rs.3 crores. As for the energy consumption it would be at the most 750 KW for all the twenty plants, amounting to less than 2 paise per litre. For operation, maintenance and replacement of membranes of the plant another 3 paise per litre could be added. For consumption of 3 litres per day which is likely only in summer, the drinking water cost per person therefore comes to less than 5 rupees per month.

Making about one megawatt of power available (1000 KW is 1 MW) should not be a problem. But if we have to spread the project to cover a population of say 50 lakh people including about a million in Kutch, a larger power source must be established to feed the 150 RO plants costing Rs.22 crores. The wind farms nearby could be tapped for this purpose. Or even if a new power station is to be installed to provide for other such desalination plants in the region, it makes excellent economic sense.

A 50 MW thermal plant costing about Rs.150 crores can part with the 5 MW required for producing drinking water for five million people.

Suppose it is not possible to recover from the beneficiaries even the energy cost of two paise per litre. In such a situation the cost of the balance 45 MW electric power from the 50 MW plant would be higher by just 10% which the users can happily afford in view of the availability of the safe drinking water.

After recovering the energy bill for the RO plants by increasing the power cost by 10%, the remaining cost of producing drinking water for 50 lakh people would be about Rs.18 crores per year. This is equivalent to what the government is keen to spend for the Sardar Sarovar every week.

Yet let us say that Reverse Osmosis is not an economical process. But it certainly deserves comparison with the process of hundreds of crores spent in times of scarcity to transport large quantity of water to bring relief only for a short duration. By common sense it is evident that the on-the-spot solution with people's involvement in operating the RO plants would be far superior. And more importantly it could be implemented quickly, almost anywhere and at places which do not fall in the proposed command areas of the ongoing, unending, irrigation projects.

With increased availability of electric power and assured supply of drinking water, the hard working people of this region can confidently look forward to a better future. But unfortunately the tentacles of vested interest have a say even where quenching of parched throats is concerned. A few years ago a RO plant manufactured by a Baroda based company was installed at Dholera near Bhavnagar. It is said that the Tanker Lobby see to it that it was never switched on. And in turn the Irrigation Lobby got the proof that such plants are not viable.

THE CANAL TRAVAILS

The Gujarat Government has repeatedly claimed that its policy on the rehabilitation of the eustees of Sardar Sarovar Project is more generous than anything previously offered in a case of mass evacuation. However, the condition of 8 acres of land of eustees choice, with other amenities and daily cash help for a certain duration is applicable to only the villages to be submerged by Sardar Sarovar. For villages who will lose their land or houses or both due to the main canal and its branches, the digging up of the canal is proving to be a nightmare.

In a stretch of just 10 km or so about 40 km from Baroda, there are nearly 75 families directly affected by the Narmada canal. In this region, Rameshra is the largest of the affected villages where many have lost both their land and dwellings and have received notices to vacate. The compensation paid here is Rs.4000 per acre of land (1 acre = 40,000 sq.ft) and Rs.6000 to Rs.9000/-for every house. There is no way these families can recover what they have lost with such negligible sums. The land in this area, being close to several industries, is about ten times costlier than the compensation rate, the villagers therefore have absolutely no idea as to where they will move once they are forced out with their cattle and other belongings. There are people who have lost on/ a part of their fields but there are quite a few who had give up all their land and have become mute witnesses to its lying untitled and awaiting excavation.

The other villages in this area are Balidev, Koliari, Takhatapura, Chandan and Bankui. While acquiring the land the only policy that the government followed seems to be that of the lowest possible amount with no regard to the prevailing rates in the region. In some cases the price paid for land was even less than Rs.3000/- per acre. Apart from such unjust compensation, the manner in which the canal work is carried out has greatly disturbed life in these villages. The whole of Koliari, a village of 30 families, falls in the middle of the area marked for the canal and the digging has come to within a hundred feet of the houses.

On the sides of the village are the dried up tracts of Dadhar river. For some technical reason the contractors have joined these two by digging a large trench which has completely cut off the approach to the fields. When the people protested the contractor told them he was answerable only to the government. Even for the young it has become almost impossible to go into the fields and the villagers fear it would be much more worse in monsoon. Cut off from their lands on one side and facing the advancing canal on the other, they

have become desperate. As the government has refused any compensation for the trees, they have started felling their own trees to take wood with them when they are forced to give way to the bulldozers. The situation in nearby Chandan is no different. Here too the village is cut off from the fields by the canal, but in response to please from an old man, the contractor has left intact a small passage. In monsoon this too is bound to collapse and the village turned into just an isolated cluster of houses.

This anyway is the picture of only a handful of villages affected by the canal. The total number of people who will be hit by the 450 km long canal and its network could indeed be very high. The government therefore must immediately ensure a just and reasonable compensation to all canal affected people, which can only be on the basis of land for land and house for house policy with all basic amenities. And this of course would cost great deal more than it has sanctioned so far. But certainly not comparable to the crores it has spent in building offices and residential apartments at various places along the canal for engineers and other staff.

NARMADA BONDS: TO WHAT EXTENT IT WILL HELP

The countdown has begun for the Narmada Bonds for the Sardar Sarovar Project. Everyday we see big advertisements in almost all the papers, claiming great benefits to accrue from the project. But it seems that the authorities concerned have still not learnt anything from the experience with glossy propaganda and exaggerated features of the project expressed by it. Discerning observers are bound to catch in the ads a publicity campaign where only a wishful picture of the project is portrayed. Not unlike all the purely commercial ads.

Instead of openly acknowledging that the project is beset with problems of extremely serious nature, it is made to appear that transforming the drought-prone areas into prosperous heave is only a matter of time. This is partly due to the fear that once some of the ground realities are openly made known to people at large it will strengthen the case of the anti-SSP movement.

Understandable, but not excusable. Because by continuing to tun a blind eye to the vital, determining factors, its solution, if at all there is one, is pushed even further. Let us consider only a few of the facts, which should find a place in any serious factually correct, presentation of the project.

1. While mentioning that the dam is already completed upto 61 metes an impression is created that the Sardar Sarovar Project is well on its way to completion. The truth is that even though the dam structure is going to be one of the largest in the world it constitutes only about 10% of the Sardar Sarovar Project. Hence, the dam work completed upto one third is only one third of ten percent of the SSP.

2. It is said that the lining work on the main canal upto Mahi has bee completed for half of the length. This work plus the dam construction upto one third of the full height can be said to form the total work so far carried out at an expenditure of Rs.2500 crores. There is negligible progress in the proposed 75000 km of canal network through which the water is supposed to reach the fields. The project therefore could be said to be only in its initial stage with much less than 10 percent of the total project work carried out so far.

3. The possibility of providing water to the really needy areas is critically dependent on the construction of the Narmada Sagar dam upstream in Madhya Pradesh. At present there is no likelihood that this dam will never be built.

In addition to this the financial crunch is such that even through the Rs.300 crores bonds are fully subscribed it is not going to make any worthwhile

difference. The prospectus of the bonds issue mentions that an amount of nearly Rs.200 crores enjoyed as short term loans from Banks, UTI and Peerless Insurance Co. is overdue for repayment. Add to this the cost of issuing the bonds which is Rs.22 crores and the Nigam will be left with less than Rs.100 crores. In terms of the project work to be carried out as per the schedule this is equivalent to just about five weeks' expenses.

There are only a few of the many aspects which represent the harsh realities of the project described as the lifeline of the state. Matters are not going to improve by refusing to accept that these and many more such problems will ultimately seal the fate of the SSP. The first step in the right direction would be the acknowledgement of its existence. In this sense the advertisement campaign currently on to raise a mere 300 crores is a step in the opposite direction.

RAPE OF RAJMAHAL ROAD

A small piece showing citizen's concern about the aesthetics and pains of the roads and town

The Rajmahal Road, from the Lalbaug railway crossing upto Shantadevi Nursing Home is, along with the university campus and Sayaji Baug, one of the most distinguishing features of our city. With the vast palace ground on the one side and some old buildings with their compounds on the other, it has a soothing touch of freshness and serenity rarely found in an industrially advanced city. Whether we realise it or not the beneficial effect of such a sight and open space on people's psyche must be incalculable. It also is a reminder of Sayajirao's vision in which a city meant a lot more than blocks of cement and roads.

Of late the traffic on this road has increased and there can be no complaint against that. But at the same time this very fact increases the importance of stretches of open spaces with trees and unpolluted air. Even in a city like New Delhi, which has people with clouts of every conceivable kind, sensible planning has ensured that the wide roads have breathing spaces on both the sides. The point is that despite the increasing traffic it is possible to prevent the place from turning into a complex of buildings which would lead to traffic jams making the whole area ugly, strangled and chaotic.

Unlike Surat, Baroda is blessed with some wide roads and care must be taken to see that the advantages they offer are appreciated and preserved. Multi-storeyed buildings without sufficient open spaces around it not only cause blocking of roads due to the parking space required but intensify the traffic. It is good for either the people who are going to live or work there nor for the general traffic. In short, it benefits only the builders of such structures, and of course, the corrupt officers of the Municipal Corporation whose job is to look after the interest of the average citizen. The damage is irreversible and the culprits with their money move on to another site to repeat the crime.

The beautiful Rajmahal Road had until recently been free from the suffocating grip of the plans of private builders. At the moment however, a number of buildings are sprouting on the opposite side of the Laxmi Vilas Palace. Only a few of them, it seems, are going to have room for vehicles which will soon be crowding around them. But of these, a nearly completed multi-storeyed structure called Kunj Plaza, next to the entrance to the Polo Club is nothing short of an unforgivable atrocity. This large building with

pillars jutting out like jaws stands so close to the road that there is no place left for pedestrians to walk, no place to plant trees, leave alone for parking. The building has stairs which almost start from the edge of the road.

The monstrosity which can aptly be referred to as the rape of Rajmahal Road, symbolises the triumph of the builders lobby with the help of the decision makers in the corrupt offices of the Municipal Corporation over the right and interest of the rest of the population. Everyone who cares for the city must ask. For whole benefit the building has been allowed to be built so close to the road? Was it absolutely essential to have a multi-storeyed complex built in this criminal fashion sacrificing everything good about the place, and everyone's long term interest, so that a bunch of unscrupulous and rich racketeers could make a fast buck?

Is there nothing one can do about it? There is nothing a single individual can do. But if some prominent citizen take up the issue seriously a lot can be done to challenge the builders' clout. Demand should be made to demolish this new symbol of devil - may - care lust for money. Some time back in Bombay a whole storey of a new building was brought down. Even as this is being written, some small shops are being demolished near Nyayamandir for making more room for the extremely crowded bus stand. But we know that to stand up against the builders' lobby is to stand up against vested interests of the most unscrupulous kind going right upto the corridor of power in Gandhinagar. Yet, that must not imply there is nothing we can do.

The mutilation of the Rajmahal Road has begun. It is our duty to bring the criminals to book and punish them appropriately. At least a firm demand must be made to bring to light the real culprits behind the whole affair of sanctioning the plan for a building which is an insult to the most basic civic sense with no care and respect for the road, the surroundings, and the people.

But more important is to preserve whatever good features that are still left of our one beautiful city. At least let us ensure that in future it is not sold on a platter by the corrupt corporators, and their Town Planning Office to a handful of men without conscience. Areas which are still relatively unspoilt must be declared a kind of heritage which under no circumstances should be sacrificed for commercial interest of any kind. Wherever possible the land near such places should be bought off by the Municipal Corporation and developed exclusively for the benefit of the people. This may mean additional footpaths with greenery around like cities like Bhopal (new), Bangalore and Jabalpur. And if any building or public utility must be built, it must be in

consultation with architects and senior citizen who believe Sayajirao's vision can still be salvaged.

Unless we act quickly, in a few years from now Baroda will become just another soul less city with mutilated face, a bazaar of concrete and smoke...

THE GREAT MEDIA BLITZ

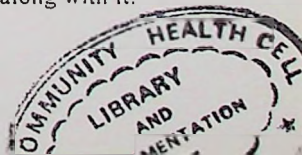
The Gujarat government had unleashed a propaganda war, spending crores of rupees against the people's struggle in the Narmada valley. This was particularly highlighted in the period of the then Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel.

The hotels in Ahmedabad were full, and the ones in Baroda had queues going well beyond the taxi stand near the railway station. The former state capital having the advantage of an international airport was reeling under the pressure of journalists from all over the world, while Baroda seemed to have become a Kumbh mela of desi scribes. And as all roads led to Narmada Bhavan there were traffic jams overflowing over even the footpaths and crushing tree-guards.

It was Jose Amazon, editor of the official journal of the Timber Merchant Association of South America, who broke the news at the crowded lounge at the international airport that Baroda had a four and a half star hotel. With the result that the National Highway No:8 had to be closed the local transport to enable the foreign journalists to reach in time to occupy the rooms and then attend the press conference organised by Meantask India Ltd, the famous ad agency. Jose Amazon stretched his huge neck out of his air conditioned out of his air conditioned Contessa specially rushed from Gandhinagar and asked an official of the Information Dept desperately trying to pedal his moped to life, "Is this the Project Site? No?"

Overhead, the CM's helicopter carrying the CNN crew hovered low to enable the cameraman have a close-up of the mighty procession...

The site for the press meet was in the specially constructed hall on the top floor where the rush was worse than any traffic jam. The Meantask chief began by explaining the significance of the Project for an organisation like his and the need for equal distribution of wealth among businesses of various kinds. He ended by assuring that he would plead for full reimbursement of the air fare for the participating journalists, and that if need be he would even approach the World Bank for this. He sat down amidst thunderous applause. Several experts spoke at length about the Project and each one took special pains to clarify that the expenses of holding such meets with the help of Meantask was not likely to affect the economic viability of the Project. The last speaker again was the Meantask chief who rose to clarify that the charge of Rs. 10,000 for a press note certainly did not mean giving away the typewriter along with it.



Later the Meantask personnel and the public relations dept of the Project held a closed door meeting to decide the timings of the advertisement on Doordashan. This proved to be difficult because the only slots available according to the DD schedule of the next whole year was between the ads for Colgate and Pan Parag. Meantask representatives, however, seemed confident of using their good contacts at Mandi House with all expenses to be borne by the state government, which usual, proved to be the easiest part.

The conference concluded after an amicable settlement was reached on the amount to be paid each time for declaring the date of the next conference. When he learnt about this, Jose Amazon was amazed and told the local reporters that he would personally recommend Meantask India Ltd to his organisation in Brazil.....

THE TRIBAL AND THE LEFT IN GUJARAT

The orthodox Leftist (communist) parties in Gujarat did not take up the issue of the tribals' rights and life but instead endorsed, actively supported the mega projects, toeing the line of the established vested interests. Number of self proclaimed Leftist thinkers and activists too appeared to be confused on this issue. Kersi must have experienced similar situation in his attempts to garner support in Baroda before the first big rally opposing the dam on July 10, 1991.

Cast:

LL(G): Prominent leader of a Traditional Left Party in Gujarat.

AST: His assistant.

TBL: A Tribal representative.

Scene: LL(G) in his office surrounded by books and pamphlets. AST ready to attend. Enter TBL and stands near the table.

LL(G): Oh it's you! About you there have been strange stories circulating and hence when I heard you wanted to meet me I readily agreed. No no no! Don't sit there, the floor hasn't been swept since the last celebration of the October Revolution... And the fallout from that dark cloud of Perestroika has made it even worse....

TBL: Saheb, I do not wish to take a lot of your time. We need your support in our protest against the way we are being forced to leave our village, our river and our forest. Someone said that all your thinking and plans are for the oppressed and exploited and that you like to lead under one banner thousands of them to bring the big Sahebs to their knees. So I thought how stupid of us adivasis that we staged hundreds of rallies with no invitation to you. To tell the truth, some of us thought you were a branch of JD(G). I am here to make amends for this blunder.....

LL(G): (To the AST) There, sixth shelf, third row, nineteenth book, isn't it the Manifesto? (Coughs) Now please pity my old lungs and do not dust it so hard. Right, go ahead read the last line to him.

TBL: What book is that Saheb?

LL(G): This means to us what the Gita means to a Hindu, the Bible to Christians, the Koran to a Muslim, and the Narmada to you. (To AST) Now read it to him.

AST: "Working men of all countries, unite!"

TBL: I agree they should. And women too.

LL(G): But my dear fellow, it does not imply you. The man who wrote these words was no ordinary mortal but a visionary genius and so I wonder what could be the reason for doing so. (To AST) Get me now in this one he has analysed the Indian situation (Takes out a massive magnifying lens and opens the book).

TBL: What are you doing Saheb?

AST: Shh..... Disturb him not. His looking for the Master mention of your class...

(Ten minutes later)

LL(G): For your sake I have searched through, but in vain. You are doomed, indeed doomed. There is no mention of your class in this one too.(Throws up his hands) How am I to support you? How?

TBL: By joining our protest rally on the 10th.

LL(G): Oh you do not understand. First I must grasp the whole complex dialectics as it concerns your existence and then evolve the pattern of the strategy which would not in any way contradict the processes which have led to the rise of the movements throughout the world against the ruling class. One wrong step and we are done for...

TBL: Saheb, I do not understand what you say.

IN THE WONDERLAND OF PSHR

Worried by the prospects of the communal forces coming to power as a result of Ayodhya issue 1 1990s, Kersi has written a parody about the imaginary rule of the communal forces. Today, not only in Gujarat, but In India too, his predictions and parody, his characters like LBS, LBTs and the PSHR are no more flights of imaginations but have become reality

When sometime in the late 1990's the government of PSI (Psuedo Secular India) agreed to part with two thousand seven hundred and seventy acres of land exclusively for the creation of the PSHR (Positively Secular Hindu Rashtra) there was great jubilation on both sides. People of the PSI rejoiced as if reborn with new hope, and sang and danced in the streets for longer than they ever had, their fireworks lifting up the skies till nothing was left for any other festival.

For the adherents of the PSHR having a piece of land to themselves was a great victory over the pseudosecular evil, and to drive home its significance, the armed forces comprising of the three hundred thousand newly crowned citizen built, in six days and six hours, a high wall marking the national boundary. It became not just the most outstanding monument, but as far as the eyes could see, the only firm structure that finally separated the disciplined PSHR from the old chaotic PSI.

Leading others by personal example was the omnipresent LBS (Leader with Beatific Smile) who was a constant source of inspiration to old and young alike and beaming as if blessed with new vision. He had supervised the construction with his words of wisdom and practising what he preached, given up his rath - its wheels, the imported engine and all - for filling in one particularly large hole, and this led the others to throw in everything, except the padukas, the lathis & trishuls and other arms, the saffron and khaki clothes, caps and flags.

The only object which could not be fitted in the pattern of the wall was a strange looking life - size statue of a lean old man wearing loin cloth and chappals on feet depicting a quick walk, with one hand held slightly back and the other firmly holding a stick. When the builders of the wall tried to use it along with the other raw materials its odd shape seemed to leave out too many gaps, and they tried to fit it in every possible way with every conceivable angle but in vain. Soon after it was given up as useless, one of the angry and frustrated young workers (wearing a brand new khaki shorts) beheaded it with one clean stroke of the pickaxe, and then stuck the round hairless head onto his trishul, raising and waving it triumphantly like a trophy. Then, amidst renewed cheering

and flashing of bared weapons, the rest of the statue was flung upon a completed part of the wall where, after much rocking in the gentle breeze, it seemed to finally rest in peace.

So uncompromising was the zeal of the builders that the wall was built from beginning to the end without a single opening, and the only means to look beyond was by climbing over obliging shoulders of which there were not many. For after six days, six night and six hours, long before the clouds of dust settled down, the builders lay flat with exhaustion.

Celebrations lasting another six days and six nights followed the completion of the construction, and during which time everyone got used to the new motherland. The very sight of the wall in bright sunshine not only just evoked awe but was a deeply spiritual experience.

On the seventh day a big crowd gathered around the leaders and the LBS began his speech: " You people have done a great job by building a wall so long and firm without a single break, complete in itself like the Brahma which our ancient texts say has no beginning and no end. So surely symbolic of our philosophy and faith!. From now onwards you are my - I mean our country's - sevaks for ever!...So thunderous was the applause to this that it drowned whatever he said for the next hour. After which was the turn of the LBT (Leader with Big Tilak) whose forehead had a tilak like the Lord Shankar's proverbial third eye that seemed to inflate with each smile. He was greeted by a deafening mixture of shouts and conch shell cacophony reverberating all along the wall.

The LBT began by pointing beyond the national boundary:

"They are out, we are in,
They are lost while we have got
What we believe in.
Now is the real test
Of we against the rest!
We against the rest!"

This was sung throughout the day to mark the beginning and the end of every speech. Finally, with a spontaneous burst of unanimity in true democratic tradition it was declared the national anthem of the new-born nation.

As the wall was high shadows crept everywhere and we before sunset it was quite dark in the holy land of PSHR. The freedom fighters led by the LBS and

LBT sat down to discuss strategy for the immediate future.

As usual the LBS took the lead: "All this enthusiasm and show off oneness is very good. We have proved the viability of our state but we must not take any chances. For after viability comes stability. You have seen for yourselves that our victory is the result of the appropriate repetition of certain words. Nothing in the world is more powerful. You should not get me wrong here for I am a firm believer in the freedom of the press. But when it is the question of the survival, unity and integrity of beloved country, we should be vigilant. The press in our country will take some time to get printers and till then it will have to depend on word of mouth. We are at a rather delicate state! The point is that certain words, though utterly meaningless, can cause a lot of trouble and disturb the idealist youth, create confusion and hurdles for the soul. If you trust my experience I would like to ban the use of words like Communal, Provocation, Combine, Lumpen, Rabble-rousing, Fascist, Demolition, etc etc... Any other suggestion?" After a good deal of murmuring two more were made: "Mahatma? BBC?" The LBS laughed and said: "That's rather clever! We will include that also in the List."

LBT then made his contribution like this: "As you know, before my enlightenment I was a teacher of physics in one of the many decadent universities in the PSI. What a waste of time and life! But it did help me to grasp that the western and pseudosecular concepts of mass, time and space have poisoned our satva. I quit the university the moment I realised that Acceleration of Temple-based Demands Multiplied by a Specific Mass of Followers is equal to Sure Success in Politics. In short this mantra is: $ATBD \times SMF = SSP$." He continued late into the night giving many other mantras, which some sevaks quickly scrawled on the wall.

With the wall casting long thick shadows the day broke late. LBT had just woken up when he heard the shouts, "THAT thing is GONE! Who could have stolen it?" This raised a commotion waking up those still asleep. When both LBS and LBT asked people to find out where the strange looking beheaded statue had disappeared from the top of the wall, two of the sevaks who had slept nearby came forward to explain. "LBSji! LBTji!" They screamed with stored up excitement, "You must believe us! We saw that thing moving with the breeze and then suddenly with one jerk stand up on its own, take one step forward to the side and tumble with a thud!"

With a soothing arm around the agitated sevak, the LBT said, "Of course I believe you. Ours is a holy-land, which has no need of things and people of

dubious merit. So do not be alarmed if in near future you hear of cases of strange disappearance.....”

LBJ, with hands fold at the back, resumed his smile and began to walk away to attend to more important matters.

The same day it was decided to send a few pay sevaks (messengers) to the capital of the PSI to inform the world of the progress made in the new state. An invitation was also sent to the leading newspapers to attend the press conference to be held soon in the PSHR with a note that for entry and exit ladders would be provided at no cost. The list of banned words was also enclosed. In a cordial letter signed by both LBS and LBT it was clarified that the ban was applicable only to the editions for sale in the PSHR.

During the remaining part of the day he two leaders took long walks to familiarise themselves with the parts of the country they had not yet seen. To their surprise they found there was a growing concern about the size and the assets of the new motherland. While there was good stock of essential commodities like axes, bows and arrows, knives and trishuls of every shape and size, shortage of other provisions was slowly being felt.

A small bunch of enterprising sevaks had discovered a beehive and collected some honey, but where was the milk? Frightened by the noise of the wall being constructed and the endless kirtans and the sound of conch shells everywhere, the cows and the goats and the asses, and every creature with even a rudimentary sense of hearing, had fled to the safety of the nearby hills. Washing of three hundred thousand saffron clothes everyday had transformed the well waters into a sherbet of orangish hue. But the sevaks felt better when told that what they had got was thousand times bigger than the land they were once refused, and that all the great beginnings were made this way - It was repeatedly emphasised that they were the chosen fortunate few by the Gods themselves. And that if this was not the Truth then how was it that from the ignominy of having a small minority in the parliament of the PSI only a few years ago, they had now become proud citizen of an independent state?

The following night, with the thought of his imminent meeting with the newsmen/women from the PSI, LBS could not sleep. It was not the unease over scarcity of worldly things he had seen among the common sevaks that disturbed him because his mind was engaged in a dual with a matter of much vaster proportion. His gently heart was finding it difficult to bear the cruel fact that so far, despite the unique role he had played, no one had suggested that he be

named the Father of the Nation. How unbearable the thought, what a betrayal by Fate, that the outsiders would still refer to him as just LBSji!

It was in such a state of meditation that he set out to walk along the wall, jumping over the snoring multitude of sevaks, statue. And as he held it up after disengaging it from the trishul, he was struck as if by lightening, by the resemblance it bore to his own countenance. Unlike his, that head carved from marble, had no fringe of hair behind the ears, and had a moustache much less bushy than his own. But the reflection of the full moonlight and the moving shadows it cast, stirred up his creative powers and made it easy to visualise that with very little change in the stony head, and by adding a pair of square rimmed glasses, he could be immortalised in the form of an idol which the future generations would worship as the Father of the PSHR. What a miracle that such a ready-made bust had rolled to his feet! He was familiar with cases of sudden appearances of idols from nowhere, and he knew there always was a purpose behind it. Fate after all seemed not to have betrayed him. He quickly dug up a pit and with extreme care buried his guarantee to immortality (to be dug out at an appropriate time) and returned to his mandap more at ease with himself than he ever was in his long life.

When he opened his eyes it was well past noon and the pay sevaks who had returned much earlier than expected were still breathless to get up. The leader of their delegation was of the PSHR air he said, "LBSji! The newspaper industry in PSI is almost finished! We met all the big shots and they said that the good scribes had changed their profession and whoever was left had taken to drinking heavily because of an extreme shortage of newsworthy happenings." Breaking the chain of his creative impulses the LBS asked, "Did you not invite them for our special meeting with the press?"

"Oh yes, we did a number of times. But what has happened is that in consideration of the journalists' plight the government of PSI has planned nearly a hundred and fifty cricket matches, and a equal number of film festivals in the current year, and all media people are going to be busy covering these. Only one editor of a one-page newspaper, though early drunk, agreed to send a trainee to know what is happening here..."

The LBS stood up quickly and ordered, "You must see that he comes and is treated well. Through him we can tell the rest of the world how biased, blind, and unjust the press the PSI has become. Truth cannot be hidden for long..." He was interrupted by a young pay sevaks, "But LBSji! The trouble is that before sending his young trainee the editor wanted to know how far, from the site of the press conference, was the nearest hospital with orthopaedic facility...."



24.2.1953 -22.11.1993

Super being he never aspired to be. A wonderful human being he certainly was.

Avi Sabavala

... he used to ease the tension and depression by adding philosophical input in a very cheerful way

Rohit Prajapati

When I think of Kersi, the first word that comes to my mind is --"Mood elevator"

Nandini Oza

.... ever smiling, ever encouraging man was always there to understand and encourage me to remain involved in the issue

Himanshu Thakkar

He is here in our beings, part of our every pain, joy, laughter even today as a comrade so unparalleled

Medha Patkar

Having a person like Kersi in the family is an experience in enlightenment
Rashmi, Ronnie and families