

India: Fighting the new green war – Medha Patkar’s contribution

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Nobody has made a greater contribution to building such a grassroots movement than Medha Patkar who turns 60 on December 1st. Patkar is best known globally as the leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, one of the world’s greatest ecological mass mobilisations. She is also the founder of the National Alliance of People’s Movements, comprising over 250 grassroots groups active in more than 15 Indian states on a range of civil-political and social rights issues.

A distinguishing mark of the Narendra Modi government is the determined and methodical manner in which it is diluting, even scuttling, India’s already weak environmental regulation system in the name of promoting “fast-track clearances” and rapid industrial development. This is liable to further accelerate environmental destruction and degradation, deprive tribal populations of their rights and access to natural resources, and lead to arbitrary acquisition of land.

Instead of promoting economic progress, this will increase pollution, environmentally-related illnesses and human misery, and cause further economic regression. India is already losing a high 5.7 percent of its GDP to environmental degradation—more than the annual growth of its national income!

(<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/07/17/india-green-growth-necessary-and-affordable-for-india-says-new-world-bank-report>) The costs will rise further.

As soon as the Modi government came to power, it changed the composition of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), a body of specialists to examine projects for their environmental impact, and the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), which decides on the diversion of forest land to mining, irrigation and industrial projects. It also reconstituted the National Board for Wildlife, reducing the number of its independent experts from the mandated eight to one.

Within 100 days, these committees cleared 240 of 325 pending projects in coal-mining, roads, power plants and oil exploration, diverting over 7,000 hectares of forest land, and sanctioning a road through the Kutch Desert Wildlife Sanctuary, the sole breeding site of flamingos. They also allowed oil and gas companies to expand capacity without environmental scrutiny.

Within 11 days of taking over as environment minister, Prakash Javadekar lifted the moratorium on further industrialisation from eight “critically polluted industrial clusters” in as many states, including Singrauli (Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh) and Vapi (Gujarat), both highly-poisoned areas where pollution-related illnesses including cancer and neurological disorders are rampant.

His ministry allowed coal mines with a capacity of less than 16 million tonnes per annum to expand without a public hearing. It also cleared the one-time expansion of mines with capacity greater than 20 mtpa if it’s restricted to 6 mtpa. Irrigation projects affecting a sizable 2,000 hectares will no longer require environmental clearance. Those under 10,000 hectares can be cleared by state

governments. It's also diluting the powers of the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

The government is trying to bypass through an administrative order a crucial provision of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which recognises the rights of indigenous tribes over forest lands and requires the "prior informed consent" of gram sabhas (village councils) before forests can be cleared for industrial activity. It has already exempted minerals prospectors from the need for gram sabha consent. This is a vicious assault on the rights of some of India's most deprived and poorest people. Perhaps the worst part of this "silent war on the environment" is the just-submitted report of a committee, with a controversial composition, headed by former cabinet secretary TSR Subramanian, to amend five key environmental laws. It has recommended fast-track clearances for power, mining and "linear" projects like roads; self-certification of compliance by project promoters (who are notorious for misleading and false reports); and more projects to be cleared at the state level.

The committee has recommended an umbrella law to create new national and state-level regulators which would also assume the powers of existing pollution control boards, and abolish separate laws to regulate air and water pollution. It wants administrative tribunals instead of the judicial NGT to hear appeals; and it has severely but wrongly redefined "no-go" forest areas where mining is banned. (*Business Standard*, Nov 21).

To combat this veritable assault on the environment, India needs a strong people's movement which defends ecological integrity, fights destructive projects, and advocates an alternative model of development, while demanding popular participation in environmental decision-making which is today bureaucratically driven and captured by powerful industrial interests.

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NBA was set up in 1985 to oppose the displacement of lakhs of people by the Sardar Sarovar project and other giant dams on the River Narmada, and demand their just rehabilitation. The agitation, relentless but always peaceful, highlighted the projects' ecological, social and economic irrationality and horrendous human costs, and led to the World Bank pulling out of the Sardar Sarovar project, and the creation of an independent complaints mechanism in the Bank—a major gain for the global ecology movement.

Patkar was maligned, physically attacked, dragged into fighting fake cases, and demonised by her opponents, especially the Gujarat government. But she took the fight to the people through vigorous protests, satyagrahas, fasts, and public education campaigns, solidly backed by in-depth documentation and analysis of the disastrous impact of the dam projects, including the inevitable loss of livelihoods and destruction of the Narmada Valley's rich natural resource base and its archaeological heritage.

Patkar never lost sight of the central issue of equity: the Narmada projects would benefit the already privileged, and further impoverish the poor. As it became clear that the very magnitude of the projects precluded an accurate assessment of the hydrological damage and natural-resource loss, and that genuine rehabilitation would be impossible, NBA moved towards challenging their very basis and claims to "development". It began to demand an alternative humane model of development.

This received support from a galaxy of activists, writers, jurists, artists, academicians, public

intellectuals and scientists, including water experts, and enthused large numbers of youth and students into joining solidarity struggles.

NBA proposed alternatives including smaller dams, and secured assurances from the authorities that there would be no further Sardar Sarovar construction until there was prior, informed and just rehabilitation of those who would be displaced, and a full environmental impact assessment was carried out. The government promised to make a stage-by-stage assessment simultaneously as construction proceeded. This promise was comprehensively and repeatedly betrayed.

A credible, holistic, integrated environmental impact assessment was never made for what became India's costliest dam project, a true White Elephant. Sardar Sarovar's irrigation costs per acre are so high that all agriculture would become unviable if the farmer were asked to pay even a fraction of the interest charges. The costs were passed on to the public. The promise that parched Kutch and Saurashtra would get water from the project hasn't been realised except in a tokenist fashion.

Eventually, even the Supreme Court let NBA down by negating its own orders on freezing construction until the prior rehabilitation condition was fulfilled. This was a black-mark in India's judicial history. Yet, as several studies, including one by Mumbai's Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), have shown, NBA was right in opposing Sardar Sarovar. Even in conventional economic cost-benefit terms, which exclude human, environmental and aesthetic costs, the project is a failure.

Patkar refused to accept defeat. She still continues to fight for rehabilitation. Meanwhile, NAPM has evolved into a formidable force which takes up a spectacular range of issues like the right to information, the cause of unorganised-unprotected sector workers, housing rights for the urban poor, the rights to food, social security and pensions, disaster relief, and decentralised development focused on local communities and resources.

Patkar is present in and joins people's struggles all over India, whether against evictions in Mumbai's slums, against Special Economic Zones in numerous places, in defence of artisanal fishermen's rights in the coastal states, for water rights (against Coca-Cola plants) in Kerala or Uttar Pradesh, tribals' rights in Orissa or Karnataka, and with peasants fighting against land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal.

Patkar attracted flak from the Left parties for her participation in the Singur-Nandigram struggle, where she shared a platform with Mamata Banerjee. That last might have been a tactical error. But ultimately, her cause was proved right.

Patkar comes from a Socialist family background and joined the Rashtra Seva Dal, the only counter to the RSS the Left created, in Maharashtra. But her decisive political grooming happened in TISS, where she studied Social Work and joined the faculty. She was soon drawn to the tribal and peasant communities in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and got immersed in work among them.

An ascetic in the Gandhian tradition, Patkar represents the high noon of commitment to people's causes. She was never electorally successful and lost the last Lok Sabha election as an Aam Aadmi Party candidate.

But her political contribution must not be underrated, whether to the new rehabilitation and resettlement policy now under discussion, the development planning policy approved by the last government's National Advisory Council, and above all, to raising the issue of people-centred and equitable development and inspiring and empowering millions of underprivileged people.

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P.S.

*<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/07/Fighting-The-New-Green-War%3A-Medha-Patkar%E2%80%99s-contribution>