

Politics in the Picture

Witnessing Environmental Crises in the Media

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In the very heart of central India, as the first of a series of large dams begins to carve up the Narmada River and savage an eco-system, hundreds of thousands of people are readied to be displaced and slowly and infinitesimally ground into dust. An entire valley and civilization are in crisis. What is happening in the Narmada valley is a story with enormous implications: economic, social, scientific, political, even philosophical, moral, and ethical. These are huge, complex issues. But they are not unique to the Narmada valley. It's just that a remarkable group of individuals, both within the resistance movement that is the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA) and in the wider world outside, have excavated these, have argued them out, so that they now have a shape and a form that is more explicit.

As a filmmaker, I have spent the better part of the last four years trying to make sense of it all, travelling as often as I could in the Narmada valley, and a few times to Kachch and Saurashtra (where the waters from the dams are meant to go). 'Witness' is a good word to describe this process, to distinguish it from 'report', which suggests a moment in time and remains the more urgent task of television and print journalism. 'To witness' is a fair description of the privileged point of view of the documentary filmmaker, and does some justice to the time-scale that crises of the environment seem to demand.

What has happened in the Narmada valley is not a secret history – it's been

researched, documented, analyzed, spoken about. Out of that process has come the NBA, which is probably the best-known peoples resistance movement in India, and even internationally one of the most visible interventions in the ecological domain. So unlike many other 'environmental' crises in the country, it has had light shone upon it.

As a mass movement, the visibility of the NBA, its active courting of the media, of national and international supporters, has not been without rewards. A combination of many strategies – on the ground, with the media, with financial institutions – has led to some stunning victories. A sustained international campaign in the US in the early 1990s forced the World Bank to withdraw from its funding of the Sardar Sarovar, the controversial centre-piece of the Narmada valley project. This was the first time in its history that this institution had withdrawn from a project. (Even earlier, Friends of the Earth Japan ran an equally successful campaign which led to the Japanese ODA withdrawing its funding.) Recently, a short, sharp and creative campaign strategy has led at least six foreign investors – including the giant multinational Siemens – to withdraw from the Maheshwar dam, India's first privately promoted dam. (Its promoters are frantically looking for funding within Indian financial institutions.)

Unfortunately the occasional victory does not mean that the battle has been won or that the war is done. Despite the visibility and the seventeen years of non-violent resistance, the process of dispossession in the Narmada valley continues to this very day. Our newspapers have once again seen Medha Patkar and three activists from the Narmada Valley on a protest fast outside the offices of the Chief Minister of Maharashtra. What they were asking for, once again, is no more than the fulfilment of the already unfair promises of resettlement made to the people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar dam. This week in Maheshwar, where work has been at a standstill for almost two years, the newly elected Government of Madhya Pradesh has promised a financial bailout, and is proceeding with the construction of two more dams: the Omkareshwar, and the Narmada Sagar.

And dams are not alone in their capacity to precipitate crises in the environment. There are also other, less visible places, like Jadugoda in the mineral-rich state of Jharkhand, where the indiscriminate and criminally negligent mining of uranium continues to destroy a land and cripple, deform and – what better word – devour its people. In Gujarat, coastal mangrove is being systematically destroyed to make place for, amongst other things, a gigantic port promoted in collaboration with the notorious UNOCAL. (The loss of the mangrove has allowed seawater to come inland, dangerously increased the salinity of the land, and made the already precarious existence of people even less viable.) Or the mineral rich district of Rayagada in Orissa, where the much older devastation caused by the open cast mining of bauxite is rapidly making place for the new 'modernizing' pace (and gigantic appetites) of a rapidly globalising world – the Indian Sterilite in partnership with the Canadian ALCAN.

These are the endless crises of the environment – of the soil we live on, of the air we breathe, of the water we drink. To think of all the endless environmental crises is indeed to stare at an abyss.

But how much of all this do we receive from the media? What do our newspapers and television really tell us about what is going on there?

Why do we not see the real motor behind the rapaciousness with which our environment is being consumed? Behind the broad generalizations about the way 'mankind' is destroying the globe and how 'we' are over-consuming, why do we not see more clearly who exactly is doing the destroying and the consuming? The real crisis of the environment today stands exposed as a political struggle, as a fairly direct contestation over scarce natural resources with the endless appetites of a small group of global consumers posed against the vast numbers of the poor.

The early signs of this contestation which have been coming through as whispers for many years now, are becoming louder and clearer with every passing year. The peaceful *dharnas* and hunger-fasts of so many years have slowly begun to mutate, hardening into incidents of police firing. Despite the overpowering clamour of the mass media, you can now hear the mortal struggle.

If you look for answers to this silence within the mass media, even sympathetic elements will offer the most superficial explanation: that environmental issues run to a different clock, they develop over very long periods of time. That they are difficult to package, they resist simplification. (The killings in Gujarat in 2002 are simpler to communicate). To convert ecological holocaust into a TV soundbite is a travesty.

The resistance to the dams in the Narmada valley, for example, has an argument. It's asking to be argued with, not dismissed in a couple of short paragraphs or a sound bite. Every few weeks or months, some fragment of information from the Narmada valley does make it to the news, but not quite headline-making and usually buried deep, subsiding quickly amidst the swirling tide of the next day's headlines. Only the truly initiated are able to make out the significance of such isolated facts. At its most benign, one dam is confused for another, the fates and futures of *adivasi* and plains farmer are mixed up, landless labour and village shopkeeper are seen as one, the withdrawal of one financial institution mistaken for another, till ultimately one is left with almost nothing to hold on to. The news is sporadic, disconnected. This is often disingenuously explained away as the collateral damage of the speed and expediency of the newsroom.

The consequence of this is a damaging reduction, a fragmentation, a reversal of precisely the kind of near corporeal structure that the struggles have patiently managed to put together from the shards of their excavation. But 'this is the nature of the media business', we are told. 'The story has grown old, the players are unchanging, the media cannot follow every sob-story, make every connection. After all, audiences tire, journalists get fatigued'. The implication is that the movement has been doing and saying the same thing for too long – that is to say their consistency is held against them.

Of course, anyone who follows the path traversed by the NBA would see that its positions have been far from static. It began by working towards rehabilitation in the early 1980s until it realized the charade of that exercise; it moved to saying, "*Koi nahi hatega, bandh nahi banega*" ("Nobody will move from here; the dam will not be built"); then to developing a formal critique of large dams; then moving onto a broader inquiry into the accepted models of modern development; to its most recent active involvement in opposing the twin threats of globalisation and privatization. It's a fairly busy series of changes, but in the media (and public) imagination it is fixed, static. Anti-development,

romantic luddites. Medha Patkar and 'her' *adivasis*.

Second, and more often, the resistance in the Narmada Valley (or in Umergaon or in Rayagada) is pitched as a kind of timeless, almost romantic epic, a classical story, a movement to save a river (or a coast, or an *adivasi* elysian paradise), an elemental conflict that pitches the fragile world of the *adivasi* against the juggernaut of modernity. (Naturally, the *adivasi* is doomed). Pitched thus, the crisis appears to be primarily one of two competing ways of looking at the world: romantic vs. pragmatic, static vs. dynamic, broad generalizations presented as if they were actually two ideologies.

Far from being static and backward looking the movement in the valley is modern and progressive in its systematic deconstruction of the ideology of big dams. But in this construction, the struggle between the two worlds is mediated/constructed around the charismatic presence of Medha Patkar. There is considerable attention given to anthropomorphising the resistance – the leader is the resistance and is imbued with considerable heroism, the spirit of sacrifice, a dogged, almost crazy determination. In other words, in a hopelessly practical world, she is doomed.

(Interestingly, when the right-wing newsmagazine *India Today*, produced a 'Power List' of fifty of 'The High and Mighty' of this country last year, they included Medha Patkar. This is a publication that has consistently scorned the movement and its supporters, editorially spoken in favour of big dams, and broadly rubbished what the NBA stood for!)

Beyond the simplification, the reduction to archetype, what this has done is to irreparably distort a very central tool in the armoury of the non-violent resistance movement: it has damaged their ability to express themselves through symbols – the *dharna*, the hunger strike, the capture of the government office and the dam site, and most potently, the standing chin-deep in the rising floodwaters of the river, *jal samarpan*. The resistance will no more be heard without visibly resorting to this dwindling armoury of symbols. Through overuse, the symbols are being slowly emptied of all meaning.

Each of these, powerful tools in their own context, must be pushed to 'crisis'. A demonstration is of little interest unless it promises a confrontation with police. A hunger strike by a group of activists is meaningless unless it crosses twenty days and at least a few people are just short of going into coma. Until some years ago, when the monsoon waters rose and people stood up to their necks in the water, almost defying the water to drown them, at least the images used to make it in the press for a few days. If you think that was a short shelf life, last monsoon, it didn't even merit a mention.

Do the resistance movements themselves play into the stereotype? Perhaps they do. And it has to be admitted that this is a failure of a political imagination.

In this quest for crisis, the last event in the Narmada valley to warrant any substantial attention was the judgement of the Supreme Court of India, a remarkably ill-considered piece of jurisprudence, which arrogantly stamped its seal of approval on the construction of the dam. For that day, the judgement was briefly posited as a crisis – it was on page 1, on the main television news, and so on. The questions to the movement were quite direct: What will you do next? Will there be violence? Will you drown yourselves? In other words – will you please come up with a hysterical response, and preferably within the next twenty-four hours before the story dies down?

Since the movement instead called for meetings in the faraway towns and villages and *adivasi* hamlets of the Narmada valley so that people whose lives were affected could be asked what they made of the judgement and what the next steps should be, media attention moved on. Meanwhile, the shocked and uncertain responses of the first day or two were seen as an admission of defeat. It was posited as the end of the struggle, and of the issue itself.

I would argue that a first step to arriving at a more realistic account of what is really going on is a fairly obvious question: Who pays? Who profits? Place the full range of complexities, the heavy layers of detail, the usual on-the-one-hand-this and on-the-other-hand-that, put all that bombast on this little test-bench: Who pays? Who profits? And the whole mass of obscure detail begins to fall off. Where is the water from the Sardar Sarovar dam going? Why will it not reach parched Kachch and Saurashtra? Where will it go instead? Or how much electricity will the Maheshwar dam produce? At what cost? Who will afford it? Who wants it? Sieved through a criss-cross of these simple questions, the political is placed inside the picture.

Certainly in our century, ecological crises are increasingly political ones. They are about scarce resources, competing interests, about hegemony and control. These cannot be brought to us by the Indian corporate owned media in print or television; not by National Geographic Television ('This programme brought to you by Chevron') nor the Discovery channel ('This programme brought to you by Shell').

I also believe that there is one other reason why media coverage of really important environmental issues has now become impossible outside of the 'crisis' mode. It is because the crisis provides a neutral stance from which it can be reported on – after all, if a group of *adivasis* from the Narmada valley are standing neck deep in water and waiting to drown, you can hardly be accused of being partial to them. But the moment that crisis passes, so does the attention. Crisis allows 'coverage', but it also encourages, even demands, a kind of frantic, un-worked out, fragmented description of the event. Once the crisis is over, when we most need the cogent, patient joining of the dots, that's where media coverage balks.

To continue to follow events, to display a genuine commitment to joining the dots as it were, to following the thread that would probably expose one to the charge of being overzealous, even that dreaded word 'committed'...

Crisis is the enemy of understanding. Crisis is the little bumps on the paper that prevents us from joining the dots. Crisis suits the status quo.

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