

# Interview

**Medha Patkar**, the well-known activist involved with the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* was in Delhi in October 1993. What follows is an interview with her by **Ashish Kothari** who works with *Kalpavrkish*, a Delhi based environmental group.

**A.K.:** *There is a lot of talk these days about minorities. Is there anything about the tribal situation which makes it different from other minority situations?*

**M.P.:** First of all, tribals are both a socio-culturally and physically isolated people. They also live in close proximity to the natural resource base which is now treated as capital for the kind of economic development that is being pursued by the rest of Indian society today. In this sense, tribals are different from Dalits or other downtrodden minorities, who are part of larger heterogeneous communities, though of course discriminated against in various ways.

The fact that tribal communities have been more or less inaccessible until recently has helped them to preserve not only their culture and civilization but also their resource base. But this situation is changing very rapidly. The outer world has surely and steadily penetrated these communities with far-

reaching socio-cultural consequences. Their economy, which has traditionally been natural resource based and minimally monetized, has also changed drastically, and their resource base is increasingly being snatched away in the name of 'public good' and 'development'.

*Can you elaborate a little more on what you mean by saying that the natural resource base is as essential as capital today?*

This aspect has never been clearly expressed or explained in political ideologies, be they of the left or right. Natural capital is really as essential as labour and other kinds of capital. It is particularly crucial in view of the competitive market economy and the materialistic view of life that is currently dominant. Natural resources form a critical component in every kind of consumer oriented activity, and are therefore being encroached upon. With the rapid depletion of natural resources in the rest of the country, the remaining resource base of the tribal has become even more critical. Its exploitation is now at its peak. Ostensibly exploited in the name of the poor and needy, these resources are appropriated for their own interest, by that section of society's elite which also controls the system, laws and regulations

that are not accessible to the tribals or other disadvantaged sections of the population.

Our entire legal system is geared to the advantage of non-tribal society. So, while there is no legal recourse available to the tribals in this situation, the rest of society is able to take advantage of every loophole that exists in the law. Even legislation that aims at protecting the environment and which necessitates a close scrutiny of all plans and policies that exploit the forests, ignores the needs of the tribals whose survival directly depends on these resources. The priority is either to use the resources immediately or to conserve them for use in the future, to further the self-interest of a small section of the population which controls our society. On the other hand, had the focus of the utilization or conservation of resources been the most disadvantaged people, the entire situation might have been different. Then the tribal forest dwellers would get the first right of access and also control over the resources in the context of their conservation and management. Unfortunately, even if the tribals have a settlement accord or land rights, these can easily be taken away by the state. Given the latter's policies and procedures, the tribals are left with no recourse to executive or judicial redressal. While to some extent this situation is typical of all disadvantaged sections, it is especially critical in the case of tribals because their basic life support is in danger.

*Perhaps anticipating many of these problems, the Indian Constitution incorporated various clauses for the protection of tribals including the non-alienability of tribal lands. Obviously, these have not worked. Would simply including these concerns into the existing legislation really help? Is there any other kind of shift which is necessary?*

Protective or positive discrimination is the crux of our constitutional framework, but it has severe limitations. The disadvantaged continue to be disadvantaged in a larger sense, and instead of receiving justice and equality, they are given what basically amounts to minor doles.

This contradiction can only be resolved if first priority is given to making laws, policies and benefits universally accessible, rendering the need for positive discriminatory or protective policies superfluous. Although these are targeted to advantage the minorities, providing such benefits which should be theirs by right does not really help, as in reality it is very long before they are actually granted anything. Why has primary education not reached everyone? The policies usually end up being exploited by a small section of the mainstream population to serve their vested interests, making the disparity between them and the minorities even larger. The problem is that exploitative practices are not carried out only by the elite; if this were the case, tribals might still have been able to fight them. But when the state itself rejects its role as protector and allies with the capitalist forces to deprive tribals and other minorities of their rights and resources, the situation becomes almost hopeless.

Without a corresponding change in our vision of life and in the existing power relationships, and without drastically altering the basic decision-making and ruling system, replacing or changing one act or law will not achieve anything. For genuine change to take place, it is necessary that the masses be empowered. Tribal empowerment could begin with tribals themselves questioning the victimization they face and saying 'no' to encroachments in the name of so-called scientific and developmental activities. Saying *no* is the first step to saying we want something else. Without it the basic issue of survival cannot even be raised; as this is increasingly realised, protests are emerging from every valley, hill, and river bank, a chorus of 'no' to factories, dams and mining.

There is another factor which needs to be considered. Not only does the destruction of natural capital affect tribals and other minorities, it is beginning to adversely impact the survival of even the advantaged communities. This fact is being constantly highlighted by environmental protection bodies. For instance, the water crisis in Cherapunjee has affected all sections of society. High levels of industrialization will certainly bring in more money, but it also deprives people of clean air to breathe. This realisation will have to develop into a change in the vision of life itself, where material satisfaction is only a small part of human happiness.

*One of the examples you gave in the context of tribal empowerment is primary education. It seems to me that this is in the same paradigm that the larger exploitative society operates within. If one brings primary education or health under that same paradigm, it is possible that the tribals will abandon their roots and move away from their lifestyles and traditions. There is obviously a dilemma here. Because even though some of the goals of modern society, like complete literacy, have been widely accepted, within a given paradigm they could actually cause as much damage as a person who sets up a factory in a tribal region. If anything, they would cause more damage because they would be actually changing the psyche of the tribals. What does one do in situations like that? And what is the response where tribals have started demanding the material goods that non-tribal elites use?*

When one talks about protecting the rights, privileges, culture or economy of any disadvantaged section of society, one cannot rule out the necessity for interaction and interventions. And interaction includes the exchange of values, frameworks and the possibility of changing others. Change is not something that can be rejected per se. A status quo orientation can be as dangerous and harmful as indiscriminate modernization. However, if change is to be truly developmental and desirable, then the interaction pattern has to be rooted in the basic faith that every individual, community and society has the right to self-determination. This right would have to be operationalized in the different modes, media and idioms which are used in the interaction pattern.

When one talks about education or even primary education as the first phase of imparting certain values, norms and cultures, it need not necessarily be within the present framework. Education is an institution that is related to both the family and the community, because it is imparted not just by teachers to pupils but also by parents to children and by community chiefs and the elites to the masses. If this basic fact of education being imparted by one generation to another is accepted, the policies guiding it can always be reviewed.

Thus when we recognize that there is a certain value base not merely in the formal education system, but in every individual's interaction with others, we realize that interaction also means influencing one another with those values. The operative word here is 'influencing'. Any forcing or imposition of values would be unacceptable. What this really means is that the right to self-determination cannot be compromised or violated. No change can be sustained if it is brought about by imparting knowledge, skills, attitudes or technology without the acquiescence and active participation of those to whom these are imparted. If these parameters are accepted, then even formal education as it exists today can be approached differently.

The curriculum and educational methods could be designed in such a manner that a child in a tribal community or a Dalit is encouraged to interact with the system, bringing in values and traditions that he has acquired from his own family and society. This is as much true of medicine and technology as it is of education—a truly free flow of information would help to strike appropriate balances. Unfortunately today, people who have purchasing power and consequently political power, merely impose their own aims and targets on others. If this balance is restored, then even though there would be some tribals who will be co-opted by the hierarchy, the situation will not be as harmful as it is at present. Unless communities are given the right and privilege to plan for their own development, egalitarian exchange with dignity is not possible.

*What do you feel about the issue of conservation which is being initiated by the larger society, ostensibly with the aim of protecting the environment and conserving threatened resources? In itself this may be a good aim, but often, as in the case of national parks and sanctuaries, the resultant alienation of local tribal populations is serious.*

Conservation is a very strange thing. At one level it is conservation; at another level it is not. In such programmes the elites of society are not questioning, controlling or changing their own resource utilization patterns. What we are actually doing is creating a corpus that we can fall back on when we have exhausted all other resources. Nowhere is the relationship between humans and nature questioned. Whatever is conserved is to be utilized in the same way as before, only at a later date, depriving those who really need it today. What is conservation for

some is thus viewed as hoarding by others; what tribal populations question is why their present-day survival should be sacrificed to ensure the future needs of unborn generations of non-tribal elites.

*I agree that a selfish attitude of wanting to protect a forest for one's own future use while not allowing a tribal to use it currently, is unacceptable. But the motivation of conservationists is often less selfish, which is the urge to protect the right to survival of wildlife. Just as the rights and livelihoods of tribals need safeguarding, so do other species need protection from the destructive hands of humans. Indeed, some of us argue that the real clash is not between conservationists and local communities, but between both these on one side and the forces of industrial economy on the other. Can genuine wildlife conservationists and tribal rights activists join hands against the commercial forces which will otherwise end up destroying both wildlife and tribals?*

How sincere such conservationists really are is obvious from the magnitude of the exploitation of resources by these very people who today say stop destruction, conserve, don't use it this way, use it that way. Saying this to tribals or others who are directly dependent for their survival on one natural resource or another, and doing exactly the opposite themselves while living consumerist lifestyles is incorrect and unacceptable. If forests are being conserved, why do they exist only in pockets? They survive only because the tribals have not destroyed them, unlike those who have already clear-felled them and built cement bungalows to sit inside and discuss what is happening to the forests. Conservationists who talk of wildlife protection on the one hand and use toilet paper and plastic and air-conditioners on the other...how can they be accepted as credible?

What the tribals are saying today is, don't kick us out of national parks and sanctuaries, because you are the ones who have already destroyed the forests. The little which remains today is because we are living here as non-consuming protectors, users but not ambitious users like you are. The whole problem thus is basically one of lifestyle. There can be no solution unless the conflict between lifestyles, between the immediate and future interests are resolved. Because even when a certain section of the population says that wildlife and forests should be preserved, they have not changed their basic vision of life. They have only changed to the extent that they are not the immediate exploiters. But they do not question the basic exploitative pattern. Those who really care for the environment must come closer to the masses, especially to those who have a sustainable relationship with natural resources. Then perhaps a joining of conservation and tribal forces is possible.

*One of the problems is that the number of people who can still claim to be predominantly traditional, even in tribal societies, has considerably reduced. Cohesive, integrated communities are rare. As a result, their*

*priorities too seem to have changed. In Nagaland, for example, tribals own almost all the forests, but are now selling them off to industrialists who are willing to pay vast sums of money. It is almost as though self-determination here is leading to self-destruction. In such cases should NGOs intervene and help reverse these destructive forces, forces that are operating in most tribal areas today?*

Human beings are not only social but also selfish animals. Individualism is thus a part and parcel of social, political and economic life. History also tells us that the basic need for survival, which is based on primary relations, is soon replaced through expansion, interaction and encroachment by secondary or tertiary socio-economic relationships. This is what is responsible for situations like that in Nagaland. The point is that such a situation is not desirable within a value framework because it does not ensure the achievement of egalitarian goals and ideals. Intervention to minimize the occurrence of such situations is therefore justified. But this process can only be stopped if the basic pattern of economic and political relationships change. Otherwise we can intervene every time this happens on the grounds that the community concerned cannot manage its affairs on its own. But this does not provide a permanent solution. In fact, it may even prove more harmful because unlike the youth who are cutting the forests today, outsiders may in addition remove existing minerals as well for use in iron and steel factories.

What is necessary is the establishment of an equilibrium which will allow for the fulfilment of needs without exploitation of resources—human and natural, to the extent that they will soon be destroyed. So while intervention may be necessary here, it is equally necessary to avoid creating situations where similar interventions become imperative in other places as well. Equilibrium can only be achieved if the communities (village or tribal) are empowered to be self-reliant not only in terms of technology but also by using resources in such a way that several generations to come could also rely on them. So only interventions which correct the imbalances and at the same time minimize the need for similar interventions in other places, are desirable.

*Can you briefly describe the sort of developmental process you envisage which would guarantee a lot of what you are saying including tribal rights, alternative visions and cultural diversity. Do you think that the current talk about sustainable development adequately represents your vision?*

In every society, the priority must be to fulfil the minimum needs of not just a few, but of all people. Every region is capable of meeting these basic requirements. But this is only possible if everyone has a say in the planning and decision-making process. The planning process should be decentralised to the extent that every single primary unit of society, say the family, has clear access to the decision-making bodies of its community. This would include the right of

every community to accept or reject a development project or process in which its capital resources—land, water, forests, minerals—are to be taken away to be used by others. The Panchayati Raj has the seeds of such a process, but it must go beyond decision-making by a small group of representatives to truly involve every villager in some way. If this happens, it would change the very basis of bargaining. Instead of monetary capital and marketability being the only criteria, natural and human resources would also become valuable because they would comprise the currency with which tribals and others would trade. This would reduce market competition, enabling people to trade only when they needed to. Self-reliance, equity and self-sufficiency would be qualities emphasized in every community. There will, however, always be external forces trying to disrupt this, so corrective interventions from outside will be necessary. Networks, wider than the basic local community, will continue to play a role. So will the state, as larger issues of sustainable resource use and exchange, education, information transfers, technological choices, etcetera will need some mediating role.

*One final question. Is there not a contradiction inherent in a non-tribal person espousing the cause of tribals? Like yourself for example?*

To a certain extent, yes. But if one really feels for them, if one not only sympathizes but also empathizes with them, and more so if one can actually live with them through critical situations, then this contradiction is reduced to a minimum. Because then we can view their life in their own terms. But if our perception of them is predominantly guided by the basic values of non-tribal society, one may continue to speak on behalf of the tribals and sympathize with them but the resultant relationship will be at best one of welfare. Learning the breathing the lifestyle and the psyche of the tribals is very important.

However, if one is to proceed beyond this stage and really help the tribals survive, then one would not only have to identify with their lifestyle and problems, but also retain the strengths of the non-tribal society to which one belongs. This would help us challenge non-tribal society on its own terms, languages, or platforms. One's non-tribal tools of analysis and the advantages that these can provide vis-a-vis tribal life, can themselves be effective tools in solving the problems of tribals and other disadvantaged communities.

The situation is especially complex when the struggle itself involves both tribal and non-tribal victims (as in the Narmada Valley). You cannot here become one with the tribals, but you can continue to be sensitive to their special disadvantages. In so doing, one can gain both strength from tribal identities and modes of protest, as also from the ability to challenge non-tribal elites in their own idiom. One has to continuously move from one to the other: from the village to the World Bank.