

INDIA



Against a people's movement

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The call for a ban on the Narmada Bachao Andolan is an attempt to stifle the right to protest against unjust deprivation.

IN an act that would be laughable if it was not so full of tragic implications for freedom and democracy, several prominent politicians of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have called for a ban on the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). There is a new penchant for self-styled champions of public order and morality to demand "bans"... ban this film or that play, ban unions, ban this organisation or that. And now this brigade has targeted what is arguably one of independent India's most refreshing and inspiring people's movements, one that has not only acquired a mass base in the Narmada Valley but touched a chord across the world. Ironically, this demand has come at the behest of an organisation that claims to be fighting for human rights, the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL).

Former Chief Ministers of Gujarat Amarsinh Choudhary, Shankarsinh Vaghela, Dilip Parikh, Chhabildas Mehta and Suresh Mehta, as also Deputy Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh Jamuna Devi and MPCC president Radhakishan Malviya, a confidant of Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, were among those who signed the memorandum submitted by the Ahmedabad-based NCCL to Union Home Minister L.K. Advani.

The memorandum demanded that the NBA be banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1957, and was reportedly submitted with details of NBA's alleged subversive activities: foreign funding, passing on confidential reports related to important projects of the country to foreign agencies, human rights violations in the Narmada Valley, evasion of income tax, and letting loose a reign of violence against the project-affected persons and even government officials engaged in survey and rehabilitation work in the valley. NCCL president V.K. Saxena was also quoted as threatening to move the High Court if the Central government delayed imposing the ban on the NBA.

The demand, of course, is patently ridiculous. The NBA has been fighting for the rights of lakhs of people who are to be unceremoniously displaced and dispossessed of their lands and resources, by a project whose viability and desirability are under a cloud. Regardless of one's position on the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), anyone who agrees with human rights principles would accept that people have a right to protest against what they consider to be unjust deprivation. A demand to ban such an assertion, that too from a civil liberties organisation, is absurd and untenable.

It is not only absurd, it is dangerous. For implicit in this demand is the standpoint that civil dissent against the decisions of the state is inherently "anti-national" (as per the letter and spirit of the Unlawful Activities Act). There is an unwritten assumption that the state can do no wrong, and that anything it does must be in the "national" interest. Such faith in the Indian state is indeed touching. If the interests of those behind such demands were not clear, one would even be driven to tears by such blind faith.

The Sardar Sarovar Project is not about providing water to the thirsty lakhs in Kutch and Saurashtra, as its proponents have been arguing for decades. It is not about providing a life-line to the drought-hit regions of Gujarat. It is more about facilitating the unending thirst for water and electricity of the big farmers, the industries, and the cities of central Gujarat, more about satiating the greed of contractors and politicians and "experts" who are ready to sell their souls to the nearest bidder, and more about repeating a failed model of 'development'.

Time and again, dispassionate and truly expert assessment of the project plans and other available data has shown that the water from the project will hardly ever reach the drought-hit areas of Kutch and Saurashtra. Well before that, it would have been guzzled up by the already prosperous and

greedy to become even more prosperous elites of central Gujarat. What is still more disheartening is the fact that the self-styled saviours of the drought-hit populations of Gujarat are not even willing to listen to simple and much cheaper alternatives that experts and activists have been advocating. Decentralised water harvesting is the key to eradicate drought and water shortages in Kutch and Saurashtra. Such schemes, when implemented by villagers themselves, have proven to be extremely effective drought-proofing strategies, as shown in a number of villages of the region. But the proponents of the Sardar Sarovar Project are not interested. Some of them are blinded by the 50-year old myth that only a Narmada dam can bring succour to the thirsty regions. Other people are interested in the power politics that can be indulged in with a big project, which are simply not to be availed of in decentralised development strategies.

The demand for the ban is also dangerous because of its implications for democracy and freedom. The freedom to express oneself, and resort to constitutionally valid means of dissent, are inherent in the democracy that India prides itself for. The NBA has distinguished itself in being, for 16 long years, a consistently non-violent movement. There have been stray incidents of violence, usually under severe provocation, but the leaders of the movement have disassociated themselves from these acts of violence and explicitly advocated only non-violent means to all those who participate in the movement. If indeed violence and subversion of national interests were the NBA's motives, India would have witnessed the kind of bloodshed that Punjab had at one point, and Kashmir and some northeastern States today do. Blood has in fact been shed in the Narmada Valley, but it has almost always been that of the victims of the SSP, who have been beaten, shot, tortured, and imprisoned by state forces. Where was the NCCL when an Adivasi woman in Taloda (Maharashtra) was shot dead by the police in a move to evict her community from lands to be given to the SSP oustees? Or where was it when 15-year old Rahmal Punya Vasave of Surung village was killed, in police action, at Akrani, during a peaceful protest against displacement? Or when Adivasi girls were raped by the police, peaceful protestors fired upon, and so on?

Indeed, it is ironical that at a time when the NCCL is calling for this ban, several thousand people in the Narmada valley are faced with the prospect of being drowned, if they stay on in their current settlements, as a result of the unjustified increase in dam height in recent months. They are on satyagraha, pointing out that such submergence was happening without proper rehabilitation being made possible, and without any valid justification for the project. This, if anything, is a gross violation of human rights; but does the NCCL recognise it as such?

The NCCL's allegation that the NBA has passed on "confidential" reports to foreign agencies exposes the real nature of this group. Any civil liberties group worth its name would argue that documents pertaining to development are not "confidential", that, in fact, the public has a right of access to all such documents. The NBA and dozens of other people's movements have always demanded such a right to information. What is so confidential about SSP documents? What confidential documents have been passed on, and to whom, in a way that threatens national security? If anything, it is the SSP authorities, and the State and Central governments responsible for SSP and other such projects, that are always ready to part with internal documents of the state to agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, external donor agencies, and multinational corporations, hoping that these institutions would support the projects. It is the state that goes with a begging bowl to foreign agencies, and which is willing to bend civil rights and environmental laws to suit the interests of foreign capital. And it is this state that has consistently denied the right to information, including to those whose lives are going to be so massively disrupted by the dam. This indeed is criminal behaviour, but it does not catch the NCCL's eye. Indeed, the NCCL's missile is hopelessly misguided.

THEN there is the charge of violating financial and income regulations. The NBA has laid its accounts open to external scrutiny, but has also demanded that the SSP authorities and the Gujarat government do the same. This reciprocal challenge has not been accepted by the dam builders. So who is really behaving suspiciously? How much of the money meant for the development of Gujarat actually goes to the people who need it? These are the questions that the NCCL, if it is truly concerned about human rights, financial irregularities, and "anti-national" activities, should ask.

What is ironic about the latest demand for a "ban" is that it has been supported by former Chief Ministers of Gujarat who have for decades been unable to provide relief to the drought-hit regions of the State, unable (unwilling?) to curb the truly anti-national communal forces that terrorise the

minorities, and who have been incapable of reining in the incredibly destructive industrial forces that have rendered fresh water and air amongst the rarest commodities of Gujarat.

That drinking and irrigation could have been made available within one decade, to both Kutch and Saurashtra, through decentralised means, is now established by the successful experiments that innovative panchayats and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have carried out. That alternative, decentralised, peaceful means of development of agriculture, industries, and energy, is possible and feasible has also been demonstrated by village communities and NGOs time and again. Several sensitive government officers too have shown that this is possible. It does not require grandiose and unviable projects such as the SSP to bring the people of Kutch and Saurashtra out of their misery. It requires innovative, participatory development processes. It does not require huge amounts of foreign funds, tying the country into ever-tighter knots of debt. To bring about true development it only requires small amounts, provided the people are truly involved in decentralised planning and implementation. Look at the change that villagers and one NGO, Tarun Bharat Sangh, have brought about in 600 villages of arid Rajasthan through a network of small johads (check dams). That is the kind of development that the NBA advocates.

The NCCL's demand must also be seen in the context of the increasing attacks on legitimate people's movements across the country. It is perhaps not a coincidence that these have significantly increased since the early 1990s, when the government embarked on the path to 'globalisation'. Such a path requires easy access to natural resources and cheap labour for the global forces of industry and capital. The price is paid by those people who are mostly dependent on such resources, and those who live closest to the land. The firing on Adivasis at Kashipur (Orissa), who were trying to protect their lands and forests against multinational mining interests supported by the state (Frontline, January 19, 2001); the killing of Col. Pratap Save who was leading local people against an unjustified port at Umbergaon (Gujarat) (Frontline, July 7, 2000); the shooting of several activists who resisted displacement by the proposed Koel Karo Dam in Jharkhand (Frontline, March 16, 2001); the enactment of the Madhya Pradesh Special Areas Security Act to ban all public protests and people's groups that the state considers a threat; all point to a tendency for the state to favour the elite industrial and urban sections that benefit from globalisation, against those millions who lose their livelihoods from it.

Finally, the NCCL demand shows a certain desperation. It is an outcome of the realisation that the NBA has people's power behind it. If not, why would anyone bother to ask for a ban on an organisation that the State governments, the Central government, and even the Supreme Court, have turned a deaf ear to... and which has not turned to the gun to make itself heard?

Ban the NBA. Ban the National Fishworkers Forum, comprising millions of fisherfolk asking for a halt to the commercialisation and privatisation of India's marine areas. Ban the National Alliance of People's Movements. Ban these and all other such people's movements, the true voices of the people at the grassroots. But if indeed the Indian government heeds voices like the NCCL's, it does so at the peril of being called another colonial state, over half a century after the sceptre of colonialism was supposedly vanquished from the country. And at the inevitable peril of being overthrown, as was the earlier colonial power. If on the other hand the government has an iota of wisdom and prudence left, it will ask NCCL and its supporters to go packing.

The NBA has filed a criminal suit against V.K. Saxena of the NCCL and served a legal notice to Jamuna Devi. One hopes that the courts will have the honesty and courage to prosecute these self-styled upholders of morality and expose them.

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