

Police Atrocities at Manibeli: Report of A Visit

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For nearly a month now, the tribal hamlet of Manibeli in Maharashtra has been turned into a virtual police camp. This tiny village is slated for submergence by the upcoming Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Project this monsoon, and its residents are fighting a last ditch struggle to save their lands from being obliterated forever. A significant proportion of the tribal families have resolved to drown under the waters of the SSP reservoir, rather than shift out for what they consider an unviable and unjust project. Unable to shake their resolve, and the determination of the Narmada Bachan Andolan activists supporting them, the authorities have now begun trying to break the anti-SSP movement by outright terror tactics.

A recent visit by members of social action and environmental groups of Delhi has revealed the following facts:

1. There is strong evidence of repeated incidents of police repression. Hundreds of people in the last three weeks have been beaten up, arrested on the flimsiest of excuses; manhandled and denied food, water, and medical examination in custody, and had their property and belongings damaged and stolen by the police. *In what is a new phenomenon in the area at least four women activists in the movement have been molested by policemen in two separate incidents.*
2. Official claims that the police presence and the construction of a road was necessary to protect and help the huts which have shifted out of Manibeli, and wanted to remove their belongings, are patently hollow. Events since March 26 have repeatedly made it obvious that this claim is only a pretext for massive police deployment, aimed at crushing the Andolan.
3. Since outright eviction of those families who do not want to move out may be embarrassing for the State, it is now trying to do so in an indirect way, by clearfelling the forests in and around Manibeli and the other villages which are expected to be submerged this year. This is almost as bad as eviction, for without forests, these tribals are like fish out of water.

The Shameful Events of April 16

April 16, 1992 must count as one of the darkest

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days in India's democratic history. That day, about 20 previous days of state-sponsored terror in the tiny tribal village of Manibeli culminated in an unprecedented level of police repression. So bad was the police behaviour that even normally pro-dam and anti-Andolan Gujarati newspapers like *Gujarat Samachar* reported it in screaming headlines.

Since April 13, people from Manibeli, neighbouring villages, and support groups were sitting on *satyagraha* outside the finished police *chowki* inside the village, demanding the removal of police from their village. This *chowki* had been set up despite the villagers' objections, on April 11. On April 16, the *satyagraha* was going on as usual with the singing of Andolan and tribal songs and slogan-shouting. By the afternoon, residents of Manibeli moved off for lunch, leaving about 40 people at the *satyagrah* spot. Suddenly at 2 PM, four jeeploads of armed police arrived there, and *gheroned* the *satyagrahis*. Without any warning, they started caning the people and dragging them off to the jeeps. No one was spared, not even women, old men and children.

Simultaneously a police contingent encircled the Andolan office in the village, the 'Narmada', and dragged out four people who were eating lunch. Activist Arundhati Dhuru had a *lathi* shoved into her mouth for daring to shout slogans even while being dragged along the ground. Rama, the Andolan's boatman, was stripped and taken away in underclothes.

In all, 46 people were arrested and removed to Dhule. Over a dozen children, who were also beaten and taken away, were released immediately in nearby Surpan village. (Later, a medical examination report showed that 39 of the 46 people arrested had cuts of 1" to 4" depth, and many bruises. These people were released only two days later, on April 19.)

As if the beating up and arrests had not satisfied them, the police then went on a rampage inside the 'Narmada' and other huts. Earthen pots, cycles, lanterns, utensil, mugs, and other items were

broken up and thrown about. Two drums (*tahals* used while singing), worth over Rs 2000 each, were broken and thrown down the slope. Worse, several things were stolen, including two cameras, plastic cans, axes, and bags. During this whole operation, two reporters of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, who had turned up that day, were detained on the village outskirts. (On a prior occasion, an activist who had attempted to take photographs of police action had had her camera snatched away.)

The most shameful incident was to follow. Policemen chased two tribal women, Radvi Hama Vadavi and Gena Balya Padvi, into the nearby ravines. After catching them, the two policemen attempted to molest these women. After protracted scuffles, the women managed to escape up a steep slope which the policemen could not climb. The next day, the entire village marched to the police camp, and the two guilty officers were visually identified by the women. They were Khedkar, PSI of Navapur Police Station (Dhule District) and V.M. Nikam, PI of Dhule Police Station.

It was later learnt, on release of the arrested people on April 19, that two of the women arrested, including activist Arundhati Dhuru, were also molested in the police van while being taken to Dhule. Never before have the police stooped to such levels, and the trend is ominous.

The villagers have filed complaints on all these events, including the molestation attempt, requesting that these be treated as FIRs.

Police Protection to Willing Oustees only a Pretext

April 16 was only the worst in a series of police actions which started on March 26 (see brief chronology at the end). Since that day hundreds of police personnel have repeatedly entered Manibeli, arrested scores of people, beaten up men, women, and children, issued dire threats, used foul language, and generally spread terror. *All this has been done on the pretext of giving protection to families who wanted to move out, or recover their belongings.* The fact that this is merely an excuse is shown by the following three circumstances:

- (a) On March 26 and repeatedly after that, Manibeli's *sarpanch*, Narayanbhai Tadvi, and other residents had offered to help those families who wanted to shift their belongings, and mutual agreement had been reached that there was no need to bring in the police. Yet on 26th itself, just a few hours after reaching this agreement, Narayanbhai and others were called by the police for "talks" at the village border, suddenly surrounded and confined off by dozens of policemen, and refused food and water for the whole day while demolition operations started under police supervision.

The Andolan has been charged with actively obstructing the removal of belongings of these families who have earlier moved out of Manibeli. Andolan activists deny this charge. Perhaps there is an element of truth in the charge, but there seems little evidence to support it. There are the reported statements of villagers who have moved out of Manibeli (see below, "Who are the Oustees?"), versus the denials of those who remain. In a highly charged and emotional atmosphere, it would be difficult to get at the truth of this allegation. But in any case, this obstructive attitude was at all times, what was stopping the pro-dam groups and the government from obtaining a court order restraining the Andolan from using such tactics? What, indeed, was the need for police deployment?

- (b) The first few days witnessed the presence of over 1000 police personnel at Manibeli: why bring in such a huge contingent into a village of barely 80 people who have never shown signs of violence?

- (c) Even after all the belongings of shifted oustees had been removed by April 3, police presence not only continued on the Manibeli outskirts, but in fact a *chuki* was forcibly set up inside the village. To date this is present: who are the police now offering protection to?

Similarly, the road built into and through Manibeli may initially have helped to remove the belongings of the shifted oustees, but is now obviously a means of quickly deploying police, and aiding the entry of forest officials who want to clearfoll the forests. The road has already caused serious damage to the farmland of villagers like Kadva Gaha, and to the *wadis* (compounds) of Narayan Chima, Kadva Gaha, and others who have refused to move out of Manibeli. It was also instrumental in the sudden police swoop on *satyagrahis* on April 16. It was because of just such an eventuality that the Andolan has repeatedly protested against the construction of the road. As the villagers rightly asked: for 45 years, the government has made no attempt to make a road, or provide medical and education facilities to these villages, so why suddenly this road in the name of development of another region?

At any rate, the shameful events of April 16 have completely demolished any pretensions that the officials may have had, and have revealed the real intention of the State to crush the Andolan, and terrorise people into moving out of the way of the SSP juggernaut.

The Truth about the Oustees

It has been claimed that most families in Manibeli want to shift out, but are not being allowed to by the Andolan. This appears to be rather untrue. The families who came on March 26 to take away their belongings had moved out several years back (by 1985, before the area's residents had even

thought of the option of fighting against displacement. Yet their shifting has been touted by pro-dam people as signs of the weakening of the movement!

This early movement had left about 76 families in Manibeli, of which 56 had given written affidavits to court, in January 1992, stating their resolve not to move. The other 20-odd families, many of whom had earlier taken part in the Andolan's rallies, were under increasing pressure from their relatives who had moved off earlier, and were showing signs of buckling under this pressure, as also under the fear of police repression. Their written consent to movement was allegedly obtained by the government through these documents, if they exist, have not been shown to the Andolan members who have asked for it. But in an atmosphere of State-sponsored terrorism, and with the sword of the Jam hanging on their heads, how 'voluntary' can these consent statements be? The Andolan has been charged with 'forcing several families to stay on, but what about the use of explicit and not so explicit force by the state?

And what has been the fate of these 20 families who were shifted out? At Parveta, one of the resettlement sites in Gujarat where they were taken to, there were no landholding deeds waiting for them, little fuel and fodder, no provision for drinking water, and most shocking, not even any tin sheds to live in. From the 1st week of April till at least the 16th, these families were living in the open, and may still be.

Alarmist Reporting and Irresponsible Journalism

The Andolan has undoubtedly been guilty of overreacting to the initial police action, not so much in their actions as in their reporting to the media. For instance, there were immediate reports of forcible eviction. Some media coverage had suffered from similar excesses in the earlier stages of the police action, but was considerably more balanced later. But far more guilty in this respect have been newspapers, especially vernacular ones, which have sought to considerably underplay the police atrocities, and given almost exclusive coverage to the pre-dam version of the event at the exclusion of either an independent or an Andolan viewpoint.

In this respect, the recent statements of senior journalist H.G. Verghese, widely reported in the regional press and as Letters to the Editor in some national dailies, are astonishing. On the basis of a cursory two-hour visit to Manibeli on a day when

no police action took place, he has concluded that reports of police repression at Manibeli are false, and that the Andolan is misleading custees and the public. The famous Gujarati columnist, Praveen Seth, has also waxed eloquent on the peaceful nature of the police action in the Gujarat daily *Sandesh*. He lets the cat out of the bag, however, when he reveals that Verghese met only Medha Patkar at Manibeli, and made no effort to meet the villagers who were victims of police excesses. Further, Verghese has stated that 'all' the families he met at Parveta, the resettlement site for the Manibeli custees, "were greatly relieved to have finally moved and now permanently settled in circumstances that they were unanimously convinced would offer them a distinctly better life despite transient problems". But Seth reveals that he and Verghese talked to a grand total of four people at Parveta. Compare their generalisation on this skimpy basis with the carefully researched study of the Tata Institute of Social Studies which showed, sometime back, that child mortality rates among the custees had shot up after their shift to Parveta, and that these custees were facing all sorts of problems of water, fuel, fodder, and fertile land availability, and hostility from the host community.

Such reporting as has been done by H.G. Verghese can hardly be called responsible journalism. Coming as it does from a senior and respected journalist like him, it is not only irresponsible, but also dangerous, for it gives credibility and encouragement to a State which already cares little about basic human rights. Verghese has rightly defended the right of "some to lead their own lives, unobstructed and as they see best", in the case of those families who wanted to move out of Manibeli. Will he defend the same right of those who want to stay on?

Threat of Clearfelling

For the last month or so, forest officials have been coming off and on to the area, to mark the trees for cutting before submergence. They claim that permission for clearfelling has been given by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. If this is true, then the Ministry is taking what can be considered an illegal step. In its conditional forest clearance accorded to Sardar Sarovar in 1987, the Ministry had specified that the concerned State Governments prepare detailed compensatory afforestation plans, as well as a comprehensive plan for resettlement of all the custees. But the

government records themselves show that neither condition has been met. In addition, an essential study on the wildlife of the area to be submerged, and the possibilities of its relocation, will be completed in Maharashtra only by 1993. How can clearfelling start one year before?

The Andolan fears that, since forcible eviction may be considerably embarrassing for the State governments, they are looking for other ways of getting the villagers out. Clearfelling may be one such tactic, for the tribals of the area are heavily dependent on the forests for their daily needs. Without them, they would be as good as forcibly evicted.

The Andolan Continues

Meanwhile, the 56 families who have refused to shift out of Manibeli have continued their peaceful resistance, in the face of strong rumours that a massive police action is to come any day after April 20. The *satyagraha* in front of the police *chowki* has been resumed after the April 16 incidents. The 46 people arrested that day, which included people from other villages in the submergence zone of the SSP, have returned to Manibeli. On April 17, over 65 members of the Chhatisgarh Mines Shramik Sangharsh Samiti and the Chhatisgarh Mukti Morcha reached Manibeli in solidarity, and members of dozens of environmental, social action, and human rights groups have been coming to lend their support.

Conclusion

Based on their understanding of the events at Manibeli in the last few weeks, Delhi support groups have urged the concerned governments to take the following steps:

1. The police *chowki* inside Manibeli be immediately dismantled, and all police units deployed in the vicinity of the village be sent back.
2. The policemen involved in the shameful incidents of molestation of women on April 16 be immediately suspended.
3. A high-level, independent enquiry be ordered into the events of April 16, and the responsible officers be punished.
4. The villagers of Manibeli and members of the Andolan whose property was damaged or stolen on April 16 be adequately compensated.
5. A move be initiated by the concerned governments to have a high-level dialogue with the Andolan.

The next two months are likely to see an intensification of the State-people clash, as submergence draws near. All parties to the issue will be put under severe test. Will the Andolan remain grimly determined to drown rather than move out? Will it be able to continue on its path of peaceful resistance, despite growing anger and frustration among its members? Will the State remain callously indifferent to the human issues involved, or will only the loss of some lives shake it? Will those of us who are outside supporters be able to do anything to diffuse the crisis? Will any pre-dam activists set aside their viewpoint on the dam, and condemn forcible eviction, if it takes place? ■

A Brief Chronology of Events at Manibeli (March 26 to April 19, 1992)

- March 26: Previous custeas of Manibeli, accompanied by pre-dam activists and about 800 policemen, forcibly enter the village after breaking an agreement with the village panch on not using police force. Demolition of houses of earlier custeas, and those willing to move out, started.
- March 27: Attempts to make a road through Manibeli commence at 3 AM. Resisting villagers manhandled, about 50 arrested. Road-making started.
- March 28: Villagers protesting against the damage to fields and houses, caused by the bulldozer, lathi-charged, and 41 more arrested.
- March 30: Residents of neighbouring Dharkhed village squatted on their border, refusing to allow the bulldozer to enter their village. That day, and on March 31, the presence of journalists appeared to keep the police subdued.
- April 1-4: Removal of belongings carried on, finishing on the 4th.
- April 5: About 100 policemen approached Manibeli with Irrigation and Forest Department officials, but were stopped at the border by villagers.
- April 7-9: The police repeatedly entered neighbouring village of Ch-malkhed, only to be driven off by villagers.
- April 11: The police forcibly entered Manibeli, arrested 21 people, and set up a tinshed *chowki* inside.
- April 13: Andolan started a peaceful *satyagraha* in front of the *chowki*, demanding its removal.
- April 16: Massive and unprecedented police repression, including beating up, arrests of 46 people, damage to and stealing of property and molestation of tribal and activist women.
- April 19: Arrested people released after considerable harassment in custody, police *chowki* and camp continues.