

Media response to the Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra in the Narmada valley was most varied. The national press, both English and Hindi, was almost balanced in its reportage of the five-week event from December 25 last year to January 31 this year. But the local media, especially the Gujarati newspapers, was far from objective, burying the true facts of the case. It seemed as if it tried its utmost to denigrate the yatra and its organiser, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, indicating a clear nexus between itself and the government of Gujarat. The yatra was an attempt by tribals and other peasants to assert their right to life and livelihood. They fear a threat to their homes, land and cultural survival from the construction of the gigantic Sardar Sarovar project (SSP) in Gujarat. The specific yatra demanded a comprehensive review of the project, and a stay on all irreversible work while the review was on.

The Gujarati press, however, attacked even the aims of the yatra. 'Baba Amte's band out to break the dam' was the constant refrain. The yatra was portrayed as a violent move to smash the dam wall, with the yatis prepared for armed combat (*Gujarat Samachar*, December 12); that Gujarat's peaceful citizenry would be attacked with bows and arrows, spears, sticks, scythes, and other weapons (*Sandesh*, December 29); that secret youth groups had been formed to 'infiltrate' Gujarat from various points and smash the dam (*Loksatta-Jansatta*, December 12). It seemed as if the land of Mahatma Gandhi did not see the difference between a peaceful satyagraha and a violent war-like attack.

Even more dangerous was the attempt to portray the anti-SSP protesters as anti-Gujarat elements. It was alleged that there was evidence of the 'clear intentions' of the yatis to create a 'regionalist' war between Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. One reporter claimed to have heard constant 'anti-Gujarat' slogans in Baba Amte's camp (*Gujarat Samachar*, December 31). There were continuous allegations of the 'foreign links' of the Andolan, in which the Gujarati press was joined by the Hindi and English press, both at the regional and national levels. The *Gujarat Samachar* (January 7) alleged that the Andolan was spending 'lakhs and crores of rupees, and where did this money come from, if not from foreign sources?' As evidence, photographs of foreigners participating in the yatra were prominently displayed in almost all the Gujarati newspapers. These were, in fact, members of international groups protesting against the involvement of both, the World Bank and their own countries, by way of financing the SSP.

The *Loksatta* reported that the number of fun-seeking city

youth in Amte's camp was greater than the number of adivasis! Some Gujarati youth, who claim to have 'infiltrated' the yatra camp, stated that most of the participating yatis were hired by Amte for Rs 25 per day, and also that liquor was 'flowing freely' in the camp. This was prominently reported in the *Gujarat Samachar* (January 2).

When some tribals returned to their homes, (*Sandesh*, January 14) it was termed as 'the collapse' of a movement'. Yet, the arrival of hundreds of people towards the latter half of the yatra went totally unreported. A day-long *Ghati bandh* (valley closure) on February 12,

when entire villages and towns supported the yatra, was similarly ignored. Various other important events were never mentioned in the Gujarati press. One was the participation of various Gujarati organisations and several prominent Gujaratis in the yatra. Another incident was a demonstration held at Ahmedabad in mid-January in support of the yatra, which was broken up by Janata Dal youth.

Also ignored was a statement released to the press in Ahmedabad on January 17 by over 100 eminent Gujarati academics, artists, and others condemning the state government's misuse of resources to

build a mass anti-Andolan hysteria. These omissions were meant to perpetuate the myth of 'all-of-Gujarat-stands-united-in-support-of-the-dam' built up by politicians and the media over the last few years.

Also conveniently blacked out was the true nature of the pro-dam rally, the Shanti Yatra, organised to stop the Sangharsh Yatra. The blatant use of state resources and the discriminatory use of Section 144 by the police where they imposed restrictions on the Sangharsh Yatra participants and allowed the Shanti Yatra members free access on certain occasions.

A clear link between the government of Gujarat and the Gujarati media was very obvious. The media repeated everything that Chimanbhai Patel or other Gujarati politicians said. Everyday, the official Information Bureau released glowing accounts of the Shanti Yatra. An official press note of December 12 reproduced Swami Sachidanand's statement alleging, 'Amte was out to break the dam even as the Gujarati public was dying of water and food scarcity.' On January 5, an official press handout claimed that 'Baba and other Andolan leaders hold no ideological position other than a stubborn

Illustr. Weekly The vituperative attacks by the Gujarati press on the anti-Narmada dam cause violates the ethics of objective journalism. Will the complaint filed by the Narmada Bachao Andolan with the Press Council make amends, asks Ashish Kothari. *1/15/82 13-52*

WAGS OR WATCHDOGS?



opposition to the SSP' and 'anti-dam people have little factual basis for their arguments, and are relying more on tribal weapons and fundamentalist environmentalism to oppose Gujarat's development'.

There were only some instances of consistent and balanced reporting in the Gujarati media. Only a few publications proved to be more conscientious than the major dailies. The *Gujarat Mitra* published a five-part article giving the Andolan's version of the story. The Gujarati edition of the *Times of India* was relatively more balanced in its coverage, and the magazine, *Abhiyan*, came out with a bold and truthful expose of the real issues involved. But these were only flashes of the situation that actually existed.

In today's world, the media is a great opinion-builder, an influential moulder of public policy, a powerful watchdog. A press which systematically raises regionalist fervour and vilifies the atmosphere by distorting or hiding the truth is a sick press, one which has abdicated its responsibility. When the watchdog itself turns monster, it is indeed occasion to mourn. A complaint regarding the Gujarati press's biased treatment of the yatra filed by the Narmada Bachao Andolan is pending before the Press Council of India. The decision of the council will indicate whether the mourning can ever be replaced by a renewed sense of hope.