

Dams, bombs & development

By Ashish Kothari

DAMS ARE not bombs. This key message of the article by Ms. Gail Omvedt (*The Hindu*, August 4-5), written in response to Ms. Arundhati Roy's critique of big dams, is based on two premises: that big dams are necessary for reaching water to dry areas and that they can be "decentralised" to provide benefits to all. In the process, she also criticises the "anti-developmental" stance of movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). These premises and arguments are faulty.

Ms. Omvedt contends that dry areas in India (500 mm. rainfall) need big dams. Is this true? In Alwar district of Rajasthan, with a rainfall of 600 mm, decentralised water harvesting has met the drinking water and irrigation needs of over 200 villages. Some 3,000 *johads* and *bandhs* built by local villagers with NGO help have transformed a severely drought-prone area into a water-surplus one. Farmers can raise two or three crops now. No external canal water is involved. Such success has also been shown in Palamau in Bihar, Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh and several other places through a combination of water harvesting and efficient use alternatives. So why not in the Kutch and Saurashtra and Kalahandi? Indeed, the Saurashtra Lok Manch has revived three lakh of the region's 7.5 lakh wells by devising a simple technique of diverting the rainfall into the wells, and aims to irrigate eight lakh acres at a cost of Rs. 200 crores, a fraction of what it would cost through a big dam.

The trouble is even such money is often not available. In Gujarat, most such projects are stalled for lack of funds because all the State's resources are going into the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP)! Ironically, official documents reveal that only 10 per cent of the Kutch and Saurashtra will be serviced by the SSP canals, and the rest can be given water only through an additional scheme, costing several thousand crores, for which there is no money.

Ms. Omvedt is way off the mark in alleging that critics of big dams are not genuinely interested in alternatives. The NBA has consistently demanded alternatives, but when you are fighting a fire in the house, you cannot simultaneously start designing a fire-proof house. After years of agitation, now that it has forced the Madhya Pradesh Government to consider alternatives to other big dams on the

Narmada, the NBA is going to actually try them out in a cluster of villages.

Big dams are not only unnecessary, they have tremendous social, ecological and economic costs. Such projects always mean either a big displacement of people and/or a big submergence of forests and other natural ecosystems. Perhaps with the kind of mobilisation that Ms. Omvedt mentions as having happened in the Krishna Valley, a few thousand people can be properly resettled. But the ball game is entirely different when the figure mounts to 2,00,000 or 3,00,000 people (the displacement by the SSP.). Where is the land for resettlement? Ms. Omvedt would say

Big dams are not only unnecessary, they have tremendous social, ecological and economic costs. Such projects always mean either a big displacement of people, and/or a big submergence of forests and other natural ecosystems.

in the command area — take it from the farmers getting irrigation — but is this politically feasible for a few lakh people? Especially when tens of thousands are being displaced by the SSP canals in the command area itself? And what of the social and political tensions that may erupt between the host and newly-resettled people? It is sheer naivete to suggest that at this scale, the displaced and the host populations can amicably settle matters. In Taloda, Maharashtra, an Adivasi, defending her customary rights to the land earmarked for the SSP oustees, was shot dead by police who were trying to clear the area for resettlement. *Big dams like the SSP are socially unviable.*

The ecological cost too is huge. In India, large dams have already submerged 1.5 million hectares of forests and countless other ecosystems, they have endangered several species of fish and mammals by drowning their homes or blocking their migration, and they have increased salt-water ingress along the coastline as the outflow of river-borne freshwater has decreased. Contrary to the popular technocratic perception, rivers do not go waste into the sea; they keep sea-water at bay, enrich fish spawning grounds with nutri-

ents, and perform a dozen other functions which we only imperfectly understand. And while a few people can be resettled, a natural forest can never be replaced and an extinct species can never be recreated. At least in this sense, big dams, like bombs, are inevitably destructive.

Can these impacts be mitigated? As members of the Government of India's Committee on Environmental Evaluation of River Valley Projects, we found that in an astounding 89 per cent of the 300 dams given environmental clearance since 1980, mitigatory measures were being violated. Compensatory afforestation has not been done, the wildlife has not been resti-

tuted, catchment areas have been left to erode and waterlogged command areas not reclaimed. And yet, construction has not been halted. *In other words, the vast majority of dams have been built not just in ways that are environmentally incompatible but in violation of the laws of the land! Given the scale of impact, such violations are inevitable... big dams like SSP are ecologically unviable.*

Ms. Omvedt's conclusion that movements such as the NBA are "anti-development" is illogical. What they assert is that any development project must be able to meet the standards of ecological sustainability, social equity and self-sufficiency. *The current large development projects, by and large, fail on both these counts, and hence the opposition to them.* But this is not an opposition to development *per se*.

India's villages are indeed full of severe social and economic exploitation, and it is incorrect to portray them as idyllic agropastoral settlements, as Ms. Arundhati Roy may have implied. It is a travesty of truth to suggest that such inequities can be solved only by a model of development which stresses largescale industrialisation and big dams. How can we ignore the evi-

dence, documented not only by NGOs but even by the United Nations Development Programme in its Human Development Reports, that such a model, more so in the current phase of liberalisation and globalisation, has in fact increased inequities?

Indeed, what is most needed is to help the local people regain the capacity to take control over their own lives. Big dams will hardly help do this. Conversely, alternatives such as those practised in Alwar, Palamau, Jhabua and hundreds of other sites will. Along with the water harvesting in Alwar has come major mobilisation by the local people on the issues of forest conservation, sustainable agricultural development, employment and common property management. In one entire catchment, they have declared their own parliament, the Arvari *sansad*. Caste hierarchies are still strong, but they are beginning to be whittled down as the whole village unites to make *johads* and conserve forests. The NBA's own mobilisation is having this effect... Adivasi and non-Adivasi members, who would have traditionally shunned each other, are eating together, living together, willing to die together. What stronger force for fighting against traditional inequities than being part of a long-term struggle together? And putting into practice alternative modes of even education such as the Jeevan Shalas ("life schools") initiated by the NBA in the Narmada Valley? At least in these schools, and in the rallies and the dharnas of the NBA, "knowledge, grains and songs" are shared equally.

Movements like the NBA cannot solve all the ills plaguing society, but they raise critical questions and point to possible answers. They have failings, like we all do. They must be offered firm but constructive criticism, criticism that helps them evaluate themselves... just like we must be able to evaluate ourselves based on questions they are asking. But to denigrate them as simply the "voice of eco-romanticists of the world" and to do so when their Adivasi members are in the midst of a desperate struggle against drowning amounts to not only being insensitive but also to playing into the hands of the repressive state which Ms. Omvedt otherwise so rightly criticises. That is the tragedy of the content and the timing of her articles.

(The writer is a founder-member of Kalpavriksh — Environmental Action Group.)