

Comment

The Development Debate

Written by Ashish Kothari, founder-member of Kalpavriksh, the environmental group which first brought to public notice the potential ecological and social consequences of the Narmada Project. He is at present a Research Associate at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, working on a survey of India's national parks and sanctuaries



Can a nation really progress at the cost of its ecological and social stability? Are forests and poor people so dispensable that they are always the first ones to be dislocated by a 'development' project? What is the mysterious 'national good' in the name of which people are asked to 'sacrifice' their lands and livelihoods? Why are the affected populations always kept out of the decision-making process? These were some of the issues raised when 1500 tribals, peasants and activists from the Narmada valley met the Prime Minister a few months ago.

What the people of the Narmada valley were voicing so forcefully was a feeling that is becoming increasingly widespread. Not only environmentalists, but tribal and peasant groups, human rights activists, trade unions, women's groups, professionals, and others are convinced that there is something dreadfully wrong with our 'development' policies. These policies have, over the last few decades, led to a rapid and irreversible loss of natural forests and fertile soils, turned most of

our waterways into sources of death and disease, exacerbated seriously the local and national conflicts over resources, dispossessed a huge proportion of India's populace of its livelihood resources, created a new category of 'development refugees' who number several million, and in many other ways spread human misery far and wide.

Two things stand out in the way these issues have been raised by the Narmada Bachao Andolan and similar groups elsewhere in the country. One is the realisation which has come to those working in the field, that *human rights, environmental security, and developmental sanity can never be isolated from each other*. Asking whether environment should be considered an important part of development is like asking if oxygen should be considered an important element of human life. Similarly development has to respect the basic human right to freedom and equality. In this conception development is, necessarily, ecologically sound and socially equitable.

The second realisation has been that such development *is possible*. But in order to make it so, it is necessary to build up a solid critique of the last few decades of narrow economic growth (misnamed 'development') and demonstrate the feasibility of alternative processes, technologies, and socio-political structures that constitute true development.

It is in this context that the struggle against the Narmada Project has played a key national role. On September 28, 1989, the Narmada Bachao Andolan coordinated the gathering of hundreds of different organisations at Harsud, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, which is threatened with submergence by the Narmada Sagar Dam. This 'national rally against destructive development', attended by over 35,000 people, was the most significant unification of diverse environmental and social action groups that has ever taken place in India. And it spawned a countrywide network of organisations and individuals called the Jan Vikas Andolan, or Movement for People's Development. In a series of

subsequent meetings the constituents of this network have started to address various fundamental issues of development, gather support for people's struggles all over India, and strengthen the search for alternatives.

Unfortunately, the juggernaut of 'destructive development' continues to bemuse the minds of our rulers — the present government no less than any previous ones. When the National Front government came to power, there seemed some hope that the environmental cause might finally get some of its due. A 'green' politician was put in charge of environment. The Bhopal case was re-opened in the Supreme Court. But a series of recent events have angered and shocked environmentalists, and made it apparent that the government's environmental resolve was wafer-thin.

Take Narmada, for instance. Before they came to power, many of the politicians in the present ruling party had joined the demand for re-appraising the dams. Now there is silence, and even active support for the project. The dialogue promised by the Prime Minister to the Narmada valley tribals and activists in May has not even started. And the Union Cabinet recently gave clearance to divert 2700 hectares of forest land in Maharashtra for resettlement of Narmada oustees, setting a disastrous precedent.

Tehri is an even more damning case. The dam in the Himalaya has recently been given environmental clearance, despite a unanimous recommendation not to do so by the Environment Ministry's own Standing Committee on Environmental Appraisal of River Valley Projects. Indeed, a farcical attempt was made by the Committee of Secretaries to bypass this Standing Committee by setting up another committee to look into the dam's safety aspect. This committee

contained two members who had been consultants for the dam! Predictably, it cleared the dam, and maintained its position even in the face of a revelation, by one of its own members, that it had grossly miscalculated a critical parameter. I am quite sure that if this committee had been honest to its task, and recommended abandonment of the dam, the government would have set up yet another committee, and so *ad infinitum* till a favourable report was obtained.

Simultaneously, many other ministries had started gunning for the Ministry of Environment, accusing it of delaying 'development' projects. A demand was voiced at a recent Union Cabinet meeting, to 'hasten' the process of environmental clearance. Unfortunately no significant opposition came from the Environment Ministry, for by then an environmental ignoramus, Nilamani Routray, had been made Union Minister of Environment. Maneka Gandhi had been sidelined, and the real ruler of the roost, Environment Secretary, Mahesh Prasad, was not known for any strong environmental resolve. Important steps set in motion by Maneka, including the creation of environmental courts, were shelved.

The demand to pressure the Environment Ministry to quickly clear projects seems to have been accepted, ignoring the fact that the delays take place mainly because the project authorities never send adequate environmental impact assessments. The outcome has been disastrous: the Ministry of Environment has in the last two weeks of July been clearing projects at the rate of 15 to 20 a day, regardless of their ecological and social impacts! *And now there is a move, reportedly supported by the Prime Minister himself, to formally divest the Environment Ministry of the role of assessing 'development' projects!* If accepted, this would be one of the

most retrograde steps that any government has taken, for it would set back the process of rational decision-making that environmental impact assessments are so integral a part of.

The present government's attitude to the environment stems partly from the powerful hold of industrial, commercial, and large farmers' lobbies. But it also emanates from a stubborn adherence to orthodox developmental notions, and from a genuine lack of understanding. Witness VP Singh's recent statement, at a press conference, that environment was important *but* so were humans! Or Nilamani Routray's plea that development had to take precedence over environment.

But there is, as always, a bright side. Within the new governmental set-up, there are individuals and agencies who are not only attempting to introduce some sanity into the government's myopic 'development' views, but are also willing to speak out when required. Perhaps their most significant contribution so far has been the Draft Approach Paper on Environment and Forests for the Eighth Plan. The document, prepared in collaboration with several NGOs, contains a number of radical suggestions, including: encompassing national planning within the constraints of a 'natural resources budget'; decentralising decisions regarding use of natural resources to local levels and making it legally binding on the government to make public all environment related information.

Unfortunately, this document and its official promoters are likely to remain sidelined in the government, unless an alliance can be forged between them and movements like the Jan Vikas Andolan. The mutually enhanced strength, wisdom and capabilities that would result, may well be our best bet yet ♣