

# The Press and Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra

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*A clear link between the government of Gujarat and the Gujarati media was revealed not merely by the fact that the latter periodically parroted everything that Chimanbhai Patel or other politicians said, but also by the similarities between official press handouts and the news reports in various papers.*

THE conduct of the press during the recent five-week long Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra (December 25, 1990 to January 31, 1991) in the Narmada Valley invites comment. The national press (English and Hindi) was, with some notable exceptions, balanced in its reporting, but the local, especially Gujarati, media buried objectivity and bent over backwards in trying to denigrate the Yatra and its organiser, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, revealing a clear nexus between itself and the State government.

The Yatra was an attempt by tribals and peasants threatened with loss of home, land, and cultural destruction by the Sardar Sarovar Project in Gujarat to assert their right to life and livelihood. Its specific demand was a comprehensive review of the project, and a stay on all irreversible work while such a review was on. This the Yatra participants aimed to do by trying to halt themselves the construction work on this project, by offering peaceful *satyagraha* at the dam site.

It was at the level of the Yatra's aims itself that the distortions in the Gujarati press started. 'Baba Amte's band out to break the dam' was the constant refrain; the Yatra was seen as a violent move to smash the dam wall, and allegations appeared that the marchers were carrying bombs, that Medha Patkar, Girish Patel, and numerous tribals were preparing for armed combat (*Gujarat Samachar*, 1/12/90), that Gujarat's peaceful citizenry would be attacked with bows-and-arrows, spears, sticks, scythes, and other weapons (*Sandesh*, 29/12/90), that secret youth groups had been formed to 'infiltrate' Gujarat from various points and smash the dam (*Loksatta-Jansatta*, 29/12/90), that Swami Agnivesh (an active supporter of the Andolan) had overnight disappeared from the Yatra camp and would reappear at the dam site to sabotage it (*Pravasi*, 31/12/90). The cake was taken by an imaginative *Gujarat Samachar* staff photographer who got some tribals at Alirajpur (who had nothing to do with the Yatra) to pose aggressively with their weapons, and claimed that Yatra participants were being trained to use them against pro-dam people and officials! A report in the same newspaper claimed that the following

slogan was common in Baba Amte's camp: "Every bullet from Gujarat-police will be answered by two arrows from us"! Through these and other distortions and lies, the Gujarati press continued to create the impression of a violent, 'anything-goes' mob hell-bent on breaking the dam. And this despite the many clear indications of the genuinely non-violent and peaceful nature of the Yatra, including the total absence of weapons (the tribals were told specifically to leave their bow-and-arrows, scythes, etc, behind), the tying of hands of Yatris when entering Gujarat, the refusal to clash with people blocking the way, and the constant refrain *Hamla chahe jaisa hoga, haath hamara nahi uthega* ('Whatever the nature of attack, we will not raise our hands').

Perhaps even more dangerously, the Gujarati press spared no effort in trying to portray the Yatra as 'anti-Gujarat' (for once, the usual allegation of environmentalists and social activists being 'anti-national' was pushed to second place!). This was done first by equating anti-SSP protestors as anti-Gujarat elements, using the highly questionable assumption that SSP is the 'lifeline' of Gujarat, ignoring the very many substantial arguments put forth by the Andolan against this assumption. But the press did not stop at this. Subtle and not-so-subtle hints appeared of the 'clear intentions' of the Yatris to create a 'regionalist' war between Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, as evidenced, apparently, by constant 'anti-Gujarat' slogans in Baba Amte's camp (*Gujarat Samachar*, 31/12/90). For the Gujarati media, as also for the government of Gujarat, the MP-Gujarat border almost took on the appearance of an international boundary, and the Yatris all but became foreign aggressors.

As if this was not enough, the Gujarati press started creating imaginary divides between Baba Amte and the rest of the Andolan leaders. No one will deny that there were differences of opinion between various members of the Andolan's decision-making group, consisting of village representatives and activists (including Amte). These differences pertained mainly to strategy, which was discussed every day of the Yatra. It is, in fact, a sign of the strength of the move-

ment if such differences are openly voiced and resolved. The omnipresent press is bound to hear these diverse opinions, but ought to be responsible enough to take them in the right spirit. Not so the Gujarati press. To it (and even, surprisingly, to *The Times of India*, signs of a 'split' appeared as soon as the Yatra started, and 'disenchantment' of the tribals with Amte grew as the march proceeded. And what were these signs? One, the press said, was the change in slogan, from *Baba tum sangharsh karq, hum tumhare saath hein* ('Baba carry on your struggle, we are with you'), to *Sangharsh hamara jari hai, Baba hamare saath hein* ('Our struggle is on, Baba is with us'). With a bit more investigative zeal, or perhaps simply greater honesty, the Gujarati press ought to have reported that this change was affected on Baba's own promptings, and in consultation with other Andolan leaders, to highlight the genuine mass base of the movement.

The need for the Narmada Bachao Andolan to make such symbolic changes was prompted only in part by the internal dynamics of the movement, specifically as a balance to the natural tendency of many of the Narmada Valley people to look up to Amte as a leader. But more than this, it was done to counter the excessive 'Amte-isation' of the movement by the state and the press. In this the national press was as guilty as its regional counterparts. Headlines regularly used the phrase 'Amte's followers' or 'Amte's band'. Perhaps the crucial difference between the national and regional press in this was that the former appeared to latch on to Amte simply due to his charisma, while the latter deliberately tried to make out a case of Amte vs the Andolan. Interestingly, in this the Gujarati papers mirrored the attempt of the government of Gujarat to single out Baba, deliberately ignoring the rest of the Andolan's leadership. That however, is material for another article.

### COMPOSITION OF YATRA

The composition and magnitude of the Yatra were also subject to wild distortion by the press. The Gujarati papers consistently understated the number of Yatra participants (at times claiming participation to be less than 500), while a few English papers, at times overstated it (such as *The Independent*, with a figure of 7,000). Both are unacceptable if they are deliberate distortions, as they must be when an honest figure of 3,500 (the approximate number of participants when the Yatra reached the Gujarat-Madhya Pradesh border) becomes 500 on one side and 7,000 on the other.

Remarks about the composition of the Yatris were even more objectionable. *Loksatta* reported that the number of fun-seeking city youth in Baba's camp was greater than the number of Adivasis. An

obviously false report by some Gujarati youth, who claimed to have 'infiltrated' the Yatra camp and 'discovered' that most of the Yatris were hired by Baba Amte for Rs 25 per day, and that liquor was 'flowing freely' in the camp, was eagerly lapped up and given prominent headlines (*Gujarat Samachar*, 2/1/91). Worse, *Gujarat Samachar* (7/1/91) claimed that many of the Yatris were drug pushers and wood smugglers, whose business would be affected since the dam would submerge extensive poppy fields and forests. It even went on to suggest that Baba himself was benefiting from these illegal activities; why else, it asked rhetorically, would he leave his leprosy patients and settle on the Narmada banks? According to another Gujarati paper, *Pravasi*, (2/1/91), criminal elements of Madhya Pradesh were forcing people to join the Yatra.

Direct, and not-so-direct, character assassination was also the order of the day for the Gujarati media. Baba was alternately described as senile, as a mere puppet in the hands of extremist youth, as a 'foolish environmentalist' out to cause 'regional war between Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh' (*Gujarat Samachar*, 31/12/90), and amusingly, as 'worn-out hardware' for Medha Patkar's 'software' (*Gujarat Samachar*, 7/1/91). These last two descriptions were penned by one Devendra Patel, and the newspaper can claim that it was merely allowing freedom of expression in printing his article. *Sandesh* can make the same claim for the writings of one Swami Sacchidanand, to which enormous quantities of newsprint and advertisement space were devoted, but which consisted of little more than calling Andolan participants various denigrating names ('mosquitoes' was one of the more amusing ones), or spreading canards (providing the Yatris a big laugh when, once, he married me off to a fictitious German girl, through whom the Andolan was allegedly receiving foreign funds). But a paper which allows such blatantly scurrilous and deliberately provocative writing, and simultaneously blanks out any responses/reactions from the victims of these articles, is clearly being very one-sided in its championing of the freedom of expression.

Another favourite theme of the Gujarati media, and in this it was at times joined by the Hindi and English regional and national press, was the alleged 'foreign links' of the Andolan. In the first few days of the Yatra, photographs of foreign participants in the Yatra (a handful of members of international groups who are fighting against the involvement of the World Bank and their own countries in financing the Sardar Sarovar Project) appeared prominently in almost all Gujarati newspapers to 'prove' the 'fact' that the movement was 'incited and funded' by 'outsiders' who did not want India to develop. *Gujarat Samachar*

(7/1/91) alleged that the Andolan was spending 'lakhs and crores' of rupees, and where did this money come from if not from foreign sources? A *Blitz* headline screamed 'Foreign plot exposed by Chief Minister', and thereafter proceeded to repeat all of Chimanbhai Patel's lies as if they were gospel truths. Repeated challenges by the Andolan, to the government or to any other person/agency making these allegations, to prove their charges were of course consistently ignored by the Gujarati press. Only the Hindi regional press, and a part of the national press, had the honesty to report these disclaimers and challenges by the Andolan.

'SEE NO TRUTH'

Blatant acts of distortion and half-truth were mirrored by a studied silence, especially on part of the Gujarati press, where it came to news which was pro-Andolan or anti-dam. Such omission can be as important in moulding public opinion as actual reporting, and the newspapers used it to full hilt. The daily press releases issued from the Sangharsh Yatra camp were ignored. A number of events were completely blacked out or given an inconspicuous, almost hidden, space in the papers. The departure of a small group of tribals (11 in all) for

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pressing reasons back in their villages was blown up by the Gujarati papers (*Sandesh*, 14/1/91) as indications of a collapse in the movement, but the daily arrival of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of new people from the Narmada Valley towards the latter half of the Yatra, to express solidarity with the seven fasting people, went completely unreported! A day-long 'Ghati bandh' (Valley closure) on February 12, 1991, in which entire villages and towns (Kukshi, Manawer, Anjad, and several others) participated in support of the Yatra, was similarly ignored. It was, however, picked up by the Madhya Pradesh Hindi media (*Nai Duniya* 13/1/91). Most damaging, the participation of over a score of Gujarati organisations, and several prominent Gujaratis, in the Yatra, was ignored; only the *Sandesh* once grudgingly admitted that many Gujaratis were supporting the Andolan (13/1/91). Rock-bottom was reached when not a single Gujarati newspaper reported a demonstration in Ahmedabad, in mid-January, in support of the Yatra, which was violently broken up by Janata Dal Youths. Also ignored was a statement, released to the press on 17/1/91 by over 100 eminent Gujarati academics, artists, and others, condemning the State government's misuse of resources to build a mass anti-Andolan hysteria. The statement urged the government to step down from its stubborn stand and talk with the Yatrīs. These omissions were not surprising, for such reporting would have shattered the 'all-of-Gujarat-stands-united-in-support-of-the-dam' myth built up by Gujarati politicians and media over the last few years.

Also conveniently blacked out was the true nature of the pro-dam rally, the so-called Shanti Yatra, organised in Gujarat to stop the Sangharsh Yatra. The blatant use of state resources (vehicles, fuel, electricity, infrastructure, etc) for the Shanti Yatra, the lumpen behaviour of many of its participants (they actually laughed and clapped when Baba fell unconscious one day), their shameless use of below-the-belt tactics (such as blaring loudspeaker at full volume through the night, within hearing range of Baba's bus), the parading of Home Guards (some of them with their uniforms peeping out from under their 'civilian' clothes) as pro-dam Gujarati citizens, the discriminatory use of Section 144 to restrict the Sangharsh Yatra participants while allowing the Shanti Yatra members free access on certain occasions: all these and other events/features which showed up the Shanti Yatra for what it actually was, were given a royal pass by the Gujarati media. Quite the contrary, an impression was sought to be created of a 'sea of humanity' spontaneously rushing to Ferkuwa to stop the Sangharsh Yatra, braving the cold, displaying admirable patience and non-violence. Fortunately there were several independent media per-

sons, including camera wielders, who were present to record the truth (for instance, Lester Coutinho's report in *The Times of India*, 28/12/90). The editors of *Sandesh*, *Gujarat Samachar*, *Pravasi*, *Loksatta-Jansatta*, and other Gujarati newspapers, would do well to look at the video coverage of the Yatra; but then, so hardened must they be in their unconcern for such peripheral things as the truth, that perhaps they will not even blush.

A clear link between the government of Gujarat and the Gujarati media was revealed not merely by the fact that the latter periodically parroted everything that Chimanbhai Patel or other Gujarati politicians said, but also by the not-so-coincidental similarities between official Information Bureau press handouts and the news reports in various papers. Indeed, government press releases were the source of many a lie that appeared in the Gujarati media.

Daily releases from the Gujarat government's Information Bureau usually contained glowing accounts of the pro-dam Shanti Yatra, including full statements by Urmilabehn Patel (Chimanbhai Patel's wife, and one of the leaders of the pro-dam rally) and other leaders. But they often also described, in as denigrating terms as possible, the Sangharsh Yatra and its participants. An official press note on 31/12/90 reproduced Swami Sacchidanand's statement alleging that "Baba was out to break the dam even as the Gujarati public was dying of water and food scarcity". The same day another official press handout claimed that there were one or two thousand people in the Sangharsh Yatra, of whom only a handful were tribals, and the rest urbanites; this was repeated on 5/1/91, when, of the "less than 900 left, most were urbanites and fashionable youths". The note of January 5 was, indeed, full of defamatory gems: "Baba and other Andolan leaders hold no ideological position other than a stubborn opposition to SSP", "Baba is a puppet in the hands of others", "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". The previous day, an Information Bureau handout claimed that police was forced to round up 117 Yatrīs, as they became violent and aggressive despite the collector and the DIG appealing for peace; this note completely ignored the fact that most of these people, who had entered Gujarat and were squatting on not being allowed to go in further, were arrested late in the evening, when they had started to eat! It also conveniently omitted any mention of the completely unprovoked lathicharge on peacefully squatting protestors, which preceded the arrests and which was reported by most national dailies and regional Hindi papers. One day before this, on 4/1/91, the clash between Yatrīs

and police was described by an Information Bureau press release as "a violent attack on pro-dam people and home guards/police". A concocted story was presented, of a Yatra activist trying to snatch away the 'mangalsutra' of a woman home guard. Gujarati newspapers of course gleefully lapped up this untruth. The official press release ended by giving the amazing 'news', that it was on a complaint by this home guard that seven activists were arrested—as if it would require seven people to snatch a 'mangalsutra'!

A frequent theme of these official handouts was the allegedly growing 'disenchantment and despair' in the Sangharsh Yatra camp. A reported statement by Maneka Gandhi, union minister of state for environment and forests, that there was no question of reviewing the SSP, was thought to have caused dejection in Baba's camp while spreading cheer in the pro-dam rallies (3/1/91). Baba was described as "standing on the doorstep of his ambulance, looking at the pro-dam rally with helplessness and despair" (5/1/91). And another official release claimed that "700 Yatrīs had abandoned the camp after realising that the Andolan had misled them, that the government of Gujarat would ensure that they get everything possible".

Instances of consistently balanced reporting in the Gujarati media are hard to come by, but a few publications were more conscientious than the major dailies. *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 flashes in the pan, exceptions to the rule.

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 of being the society's watchdog. When the watchdog itself turns monster, there 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. The decision of the Council will tell whether the mourning can be converted into a regained sense of hope.

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