

Medha Patkar **by Aaron Crawford**

Personal Reflection: When I first began researching Medha Patkar my vision, analysis, and knowledge for that matter was quite myopic. I initially didn't really think someone trying to stop the construction of a dam could be engaging let alone significant. However, as my research continued I found myself participating in a sort of searching or hunt for knowledge. What I was coming to realize through researching Medha Patkar was that I only knew minor details to very important and very "loaded" topics. These topics ranged from the World Bank (in terms of initial location, formations of internal hierarchy, etc.) to issues as rudimentary as how a dam works to produce electricity, irrigation, etc.

When I use the term loaded, what I mean is from this research I gained a better understanding of the ways in which "natural" elements such as water, land, and even people have/are being socially and culturally constructed. The importance of acknowledging these constructs is because they are not fixed or set in stone. These constructions are very fluid and are constantly changing. A great example of this is our approach or ideas regarding water. Not that many years ago water was treated and viewed as communal property. Although in some rural areas this continues, for the most part it has changed. The change was a shift in perspective, not the object. The water stayed the same but the dominant view of individual ownership is what was altered.

Another reason Medha deserves status as a significant woman is her ability to articulate problems that arise out of dualistic thinking and acting. What makes her articulation even more significant is that she creatively seeks out ways to breakdown and reconnect the local/global, state/federal, micro/macro, binaries.

Biography:

In 1955, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, has been widely quoted for calling dams the "temples of modern India". Yet, it is pointed out decades later by Medha Patkar, Nehru in 1958 described the dams as "a disease of gigantism' that we must withdraw from"(Jensen). Throughout the ensuing struggle, for Medha Patkar information and appropriation are significant and sometimes synonymous.

Medha Patkar was born in Bombay, India on December 1, 1954. Medha was raised by two politically and socially active parents. Her father fought in the independence movement that helped establish India's sovereignty from British colonial rule. Later Medha's father helped with the organizational efforts of the trade union. Medha's mother is a member of a women's organization named Swadar. Swadar is set up to help and assist women who are suffering difficult circumstances stemming from financial, educational, and health related problems. Medha's mother and her father's activism played a major role in shaping her philosophical views. Medha's societal analysis is highlighted through her philosophical wisdom, whereas she says, "(t)here has to be a micro-to-macro linkage to put ourselves forward as political actors"(Jenson). Patkar's articulation of a micro-to-macro linkage is the foundation of her political, social, and economic struggle.

After earning a M.A. in Social Work from the Tata Institute of Social Science, Medha began working with voluntary organizations in Bombay for five years. Following this voluntary work in Bombay she also worked with voluntary organizations in tribal districts of East Gujarat for two years. Medha then earned a position on the faculty at her alma mater the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. While back at Tata Institute Medha Patkar began working on her Ph.D. However, Medha was slowly emerging towards a split in her life's pathway and she would be forced to make a life altering decision.

In west India, during the sixties and early seventies, debates were increasing over how to "better" provide for this section of the countries impoverished areas. The argument for building several large dams was gaining momentum within the local state government of Gujarat. However, the surrounding states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra took on a more critical approach to the dams and remained in opposition. The state's ideas of building the dams were proposed to the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal in 1969. The state sought legitimacy through claims that the dams

would create a surplus of water that could be channeled to the impoverished areas, therefore providing clean drinking water, irrigation, and electricity. Ten years later in 1979 the Sardar Sarovar Project in particular and the Narmada Valley Development Project as a whole, in which called for 30 major, 135 medium, and 3,000 small dams, were granted approval for construction by India's Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal.

In 1985, as news of the dams began to filter into central and eastern parts of the country, Medha Patkar and a few of her colleagues from the institute took a trip to the Narmada Valley region. Upon her visit to Narmada Valley and a few of its villages Medha discovered that all ground work for the Sardar Sarovar program, which is considered the centerpiece of the Narmada Valley Project, had been suspended. The projects halt came at the immediate request of the Ministry of Environment. The Sardar Sarovar Project was stopped due to the "nonfulfillment of basic environmental conditions and the lack of completion of crucial studies and plans" (Patkar 157).

The first thing Medha knew she had to do was establish some dialogue between herself and the residence from the Narmada Valley area. Listening to the people, Patkar learned that the only information they were given was that the dams would be built and people in the area would be rehabilitated or displaced. Medha also found out that the residents had not seen nor been briefed by a representative as declared by the local governments. The people were full of questions and comments and Medha listened carefully to their concerns about their rights as well as their outrage at the situation. Through Medha's highly effective means of interactive communication between the government (at a macro level) and the residents (at the micro level), she presented these critiques to the local governments. Then Medha delivered the government's responses and all new information back to the people of Narmada Valley. As Medha became deeply immersed in the Narmada struggle, she was also currently in the midst of working on her Ph.D. However, Medha decided to leave the world of academia behind, and in a manner similar to that of her parents she chose social activism.

The following year in 1986 the World Bank was called upon by the state governments and project leaders to provide some of the financing for the Sardar Sarovar Project. Medha Patkar knew that the only way to defeat the World Bank and stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar was through organizing. Therefore, Medha and her colleagues organized a long march from Madhya Pradesh to the dam site. The thirty-six day march would be a symbol of solidarity among the neighboring states of Narmada Valley as well as a direct challenge to the government and the World Bank. Medha viewed the march as "a path symbolizing the long path of struggle (both immediate and long-term) that [they] really had"(Patkar 166). The thirty-six day long trek also allowed them to discuss in great length the details of the Sardar Sarovar Project, other development issues, and alternative

methods/ideologies they could propose.

Overriding the march as a whole was a dualistic ideological approach. On the one hand the marchers had to endorse a strict ideological commitment to non-violence. On the other hand the practice of Satyagraha must be fully embraced. Satyagraha is an ideological practice that Gandhi took on to help defeat the British. The word satya meaning truth or love and graha meaning force were coupled with non-violence as the preconditions for this march. In order to show this commitment marchers walked with their hands folded and tied in front of themselves. However, as Medha and her fellow marchers reached the border of Gujarat they were greeted with the deployment of thousands of police officers spread out along the border. As the marchers tried to continue the police acted with violent forms of repression. According to Medha Patkar the police were "caning the marchers and arresting them and tearing the clothes off women activists"(Patkar 166). The police's use of physical force and abuse against the marchers brought in the inquiring local press. This extra publicity would become beneficial for the marchers and Medha Patkar as well.

The march was highly successful in bringing more attention to the Sardar Sarovar Project. The added exposure allowed Medha to connect with residents from the eastern part of the project called Andolan. Soon after Medha Patkar formed the Narmada Bachao Andolan (save the Narmada movement). The Narmada Bachao Andolan or NBA, created in 1989, was formed in order to provide the residents in the Narmada Valley with access to important project information, and legal representation. The NBA came to represent the solidarity among the states and tribal territories affected by the construction of the dams. The NBA's primary focus was directed towards stopping the Sardar Sarovar Project. Yet, Medha Patkar advised the organization to include within their focus the World Bank.

Medha Patkar and the World Bank endorse two drastically different ideologies. Patkar believes in a decentralized, highly democratic means of production and sustainability. Whereas, the World Bank takes on a more centralized, "one size fits all" mentality. Medha Patkar, in an interview with Robert Jensen, analyzes the World Bank's power, legitimacy, and authority. Patkar says, "(o)nce the financing is taken care of... (f)oreign capital legitimates the process. Lenders like the World Bank bring their own credibility, among the elite and planning population, and then people say, '(w)ho are you to know better than the World Bank? "(Jensen). Thus, Medha knew that the economic clout of the World Bank could and would act as a self- legitimizing force. Therefore, the next barrier within the struggle was centered on how Medha, the residents, and the NBA would combat the economic dominance of the World Bank.

Reflecting back on the success of the march, Medha knew that the violence and abusive acts against non-violent marchers undercut/undermined the police's moral legitimacy. So in order for the residents, the NBA, and Medha to drive out the World Bank they would need to undercut, undermine, and discredit the Bank's legitimacy. Medha and the NBA decided to expose the Bank's lies and ulterior motives for funding the Sardar Sarovar. They discovered that the Bank was well aware of the project's negative impact on the people and their environment prior to their endorsement of Sardar Sarovar. The project's major negative impacts would cause water logging and salinization of the soil heavily used by the agricultural/horticultural segments of the population, the degradation of the surrounding bodies of water, as well as the lack of alternative land for the citizens displaced by the dams. The Narmada Bachao Andolan thus pitted the Bank up against India's Ministry of Environment and Forests by highlighting the World Bank's agreement to act as part financial supporter of the Sardar Sarovar Project after India's Ministry of Environment and Forests had challenged and forcefully stalled the project.

Medha Patkar believed that the most affective non-violent weapon for protesters was the right to fast. The style of fasting implemented by the NBA to undermine the World Bank's authority is called a Dharna. A Dharna is a fasting that takes place on the literal doorstep of an offender or debtor. The Dharna is highly affective in that it both draws attention to a desired place or region and provokes direct confrontation through non-violent action. The NBA fasts mainly targeted local government officials, ministers, and the dam sites that were to be submerged. As a result, after nearly seven years of opposition, protests, and fasting, Medha and everyone working with her were able to get the World Bank to withdraw its endorsement of the Sardar Sarovar Project in 1993. Yet, the NBA, the local residents, and Medha's celebration would be short lived as India's government announced it would increase its financial assistance to the project.

During the early nineties Medha started gaining national and international notoriety for her efforts in the movement. Patkar won the Goldman Environment Award in 1991 as well as in 1992. Medha Patkar has also received many other awards such as the Right Lively Award, Green Ribbon Award for Best International Political Campaigner by BBC, the Human Rights Defender's Award from Amnesty International, among many others. However, one of Medha's greatest rewards came in 1995 from the Supreme Court. Previously, in 1994 India's Supreme Court allowed the height of the Sardar Sarovar Project, within certain areas, to be increased. Shortly after this decision, Andolan (of the NBA) presented India's Supreme Court with a petition to stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Project on the grounds of its severe environmental destruction, incongruent and inconsistent economic planning, as well as its genocidal affects to the regions citizens whose livelihoods are inextricably connected to the land. In 1995 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the residents, Medha

Patkar and the NBA, by legally stopping all construction of the Sardar Sarovar Project until the government could produce a competent and coherent project plan. This, however, did not stop Medha from her continuous organizing. Medha and her colleagues went to Seattle and Washington to protest the World Trade Organization in 1999. Then during the following year, Patkar and her colleagues traveled to Prague within the Czech Republic to protest the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Unfortunately, Medha's oppositional gains once again were short lived. In 1999 India's Supreme Court lifted the ban on the dam project and allowed for another dam height increase. The project workers wasted little time building and attempting to clear the land, forcing Medha Patkar and the NBA's opposition to increase tenfold. In August of the same year, The Hindu, one of India's leading national newspapers, reported that "(t)he Narmada Bachao Andolan leader, Ms. Medha Patkar, and about 50 others were taken under police custody from the remote Domkhedi tribal village... Ms. Patkar and others had stood in nearly waist-deep waters for almost 12 hours before they were taken into custody... (a)s the Narmada waters rose due to incessant rainfall in parts of Madhya Pradesh in the last 36 hours, coupled with releases from three dams on the river the "satyagraha" villages were submerged. A couple months prior to this satyagraha, Medha and her colleagues were involved in two other satyagrahas at submergence sites. During one, the water reached the level of Medha's neck before she was forcefully moved. Renowned writer and author Arundhati Roy joined Medha Patkar in the struggle against submergence.

Medha Patkar, using the notion of solidarity as a springboard, then helped create the National Alliance of People's Movement or the NAPM. NAPM is a collaboration effort of over a hundred India based organizations to collectively organize around issues of globalization, neo-liberalism, and sustainable development, as well as many others. The NAPM recently created the People's Political Front. Medha was asked why she believed the transition was necessary. Her eloquent response was "(i)t is necessary to challenge the changed culture of politics, which is criminal and communal to a large extent; which brings in not just religion but caste as a force, to carry on the game of numbers. Not only is it corporatised and corrupt, but crudely and confidently uses and misuses the resources of the country, with big industrial houses financing and controlling the parties" (The Hindu 04).

Currently, the Narmada Valley Development Project continues its push towards the ultimate goal of 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams along the Narmada River. The displacement of the residents and the lack of land and/or rehabilitation continues to plague the project's development. Other negative affects are an increase in male suicides and homelessness, and that

the once plentiful water is slowly becoming scarce. Seemingly the plight of India appears to be a reflection of injustice, inequality, and social misery. However, Medha Patkar, her colleagues, the NBA, and the NAPM, are all symbols of hope. Medha Patkar conveys this message of hope and solidarity, when she says, "(w)e have to challenge these forces, conveying to them that we who resist are not just in nooks and corners of the world. We are together... But it can't be just a one-time demonstration in the street, but continuous strategizing and action on multiple fronts that can challenge these forces"(Jensen).

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Timeline

1947: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru makes a speech stating that dam-building is the same as nation-building.

1954: Medha Patkar born.

1969: Dams on the sacred Narmada River proposed.

1979: Sardar Sarovar Project calls for 30 major dams, 135 medium dams, and 3,000 small dams to be build.

1980s: After graduating in social work, Patkar works in the Mumbai slums.

1985: Patkar visits Narmada Valley. Lives among the tribal peoples. Begins work on environmental impact of dams on ousted peoples. Begins massive mobilizing projects.

1986: Government calls upon World Bank to help provide financing for dam projects. Patkar and colleagues lead 36 day protest march.

1988: The construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam--the linchpin of the Narmada Valley Development - begins. Patkar helps merge protest movements into single unit known as the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

1990: Thousands of people affected by the dam set off on a march to the dam site. Patkar wins Goldman Environmental Award.

1991: Patkar engages in a 21 day protest fast which brings her close to death. World Bank announces an Independent Review of the Sardar Sarovar Projects.

1993: World Bank finally pulls out of the Sardar Sarovar Projects.

1995: Supreme Court stops all construction of Sardar Sarovar Project.

1996: State governments continue increasing height of dam; Patkar arrested for standing in submerged sites caused by Narmada dam. Helps create National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM). Joins protests against World Trade Organization in Seattle.

1998: India celebrates achievement of tests for nuclear explosion in "National Pride Day." Patkar and others hold protest rallies in Capital: "We want rotis, not bombs."

2000: Patkar joins protests against IMF and World Bank in Prague. Indian Supreme Court delivers its final judgment in the Sardar Sarovar case, allowing construction to resume on the controversial dam on the Narmada River. In demonstration before Court, Patkar and others condemned for shouting abusive slogans.

2001: Patkar files Contempt Petition before the Supreme Court of India and is acquitted.

2006: Patkar supports demonstrations against police killing of 12 tribals who had protested the construction of a steel company on their lands.