

# The Thakore Award for the Year 2000:

## The Narmada Struggle

—Don Grayston

On October 2, 2000, the Thakore Award was presented to Medha Patkar and Sri Baba Amte, longtime Gandhian activists. It was accepted in person only by Medha Patkar, inasmuch as Baba Amte was prevented by age and infirmity from being present with us at Simon Fraser. Those of us who were there heard an address from a woman with the heart of a tiger, “burning bright,” as William Blake said, a woman utterly committed to her struggle.

What then is the Narmada struggle in which Medha Patkar and Baba Amte have been involved since 1985? It involves the projected building of a huge complex of dams on the Narmada River, the Sardar Sarovar Project, initiated by three state governments in the northwest of India. The dams are understood by their proponents in terms of the vision of former Prime Minister Nehru, who saw them as the key to India's economic growth. In fact what has happened is that the project has become a sinkhole for public money, a context of corruption and power-grabbing by local politicians, and, worst of all, the cause of the destruction of a way of life lived *for thousands of years* by the people who have lived in a peaceful relationship with the great Narmada River. Some 35,000 of these people, many of them *adivasis*, or aboriginal people, have already been displaced from their homes, and the many political promises of rehabilitation and resettlement unkept.

A number of events have transpired since Medha Patkar's visit to Simon Fraser last October. In November the Supreme Court of India ruled against the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the movement inspired by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte) and authorized the state governments to proceed with the damming project. The NBA protested this by means of a rally held in front

of the Supreme Court buildings, as a result of which the NBA leaders, including novelist Arundhati Roy, were charged with contempt of court. In response to this charge, a number of prominent Indian activists, as well as thousands of village-level supporters, asked to be named as co-defendants.

In another incident, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy and another colleague, in an entirely fabricated set of charges, were accused of assault, public drunkenness, the uttering of death threats and the employment of goon squads to intimidate the proponents of the project. Clearly their opponents, powerful politicians and industrialists, are trying to exhaust their movement by tying the leaders up in costly court cases. Other incidents of defamation, intimidation and the killing of activists have followed.

In response, the NBA organized a *parikrama*, or village walkabout, in which activists moved from village to village in the basin of the Narmada, organizing teach-ins and celebrations through dancing and singing of the cultural importance of the Narmada, seen in Hindu tradition as a goddess and mother of the region. It has also successfully organized a *dharna* or sit-in at the Tehri Dam, which is being built in a seismically highly sensitive location, not far from the epicentre of the January 2000 earthquake in Bhuj.

Here in Medha Patkar's own words (from a recent email) is what is happening in the Narmada struggle.

It is taken from her statement to the court (one thinks here of Gandhi before the British courts in India) in response to the contempt charge:

“I have worked for the last 16 years for the cause of ... people, tribals and peasants, who will be adversely affected by the Sardar Sarovar Project and other gigantic projects in the Narmada Valley and elsewhere. I have raised the issue of such mega-projects, the development, planning, democratic and human rights and economic issues, and the consumption of monetary and natural resources by such projects. I have also suggested just and sustainable alternatives in water, energy and other sectors. Most of those that I work with in the Valley are going to lose their lands, their homes, their forests, their communities, their culture and indeed their very identity because of this project. I have taken up their cause because I can feel their loss; I can identify with them—they are indeed like my family. I will continue to fight for them in every forum and in every way that I can. I will continue to challenge the unjust system that deprives common people, especially those in the natural resource-based communities who pay the cost for the benefit of those who already have much more than they. I will continue to help them raise their voices in protest against this system even if I have to do so against the Judiciary and the Courts. I will continue to do so as long as I can, even if I have to be punished for contempt for doing that.”

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*After Medha Patkar's visit to SFU, a Narmada support group was formed in the Lower Mainland (contact Gunwant Shah, 604-421-4744). Anyone interested in receiving updates on the struggle can write the Narmada Bachao Andolan directly at [medha@narmada.org](mailto:medha@narmada.org) and ask to be placed on its mailing list. Given the strength of both sides in this struggle, strength of very different kinds, we can expect it to continue without letup well into the foreseeable future.*