

“Her Life is Her Message”: Medha Patkar at MIT
March 23, 2009

Over the last quarter of a century, Medha Patkar has come to symbolize the voice of the people struggling for a just, sustainable and peaceful society. Coming from a family that was involved in the freedom movement of India, she accepted social action as her natural vocation. She left her position on the faculty of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, as well as her unfinished Ph.D. work to become immersed in the struggles of the indigenous communities in the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. She started the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Forum) which has been at the forefront of the struggle to uphold the lives and lands of the indigenous people of the Narmada valley, which is threatened with submergence by the mega Sardar Sarovar Project. To knit together the various movements working across the country among the base communities, Ms. Patkar also pioneered the founding of the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM). In recognition of her services to the society, Medha Patkar has received numerous awards, including the Deena Nath Mangeshkar Award, Mahatma Phule Award, Right Livelihood Award, Goldman Environment Prize, Green Ribbon Award for Best International Political Campaigner by BBC, and the Human Rights Defender's Award from Amnesty International.

During a short visit to the United States this month, Ms. Patkar addressed gatherings at the Emory University, Atlanta and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. During her meetings here, she recognized the positive climate created in this country by the election of Barack Obama as the President. Medha Patkar however, also cautioned the people against undue optimism. The new administration should be evaluated on the basis of its commitment to uphold the values of peace and justice everywhere. In the light of the tendency of people in authority to tread cautiously, she noted: “Our task is to be always in the opposition, irrespective of who is in power”.

In an interview with Amy Goodman which was telecast by *Democracy Now* on March 23rd, Medha Patkar referred to the economic crisis in the United States that is rapidly assuming global proportions. While the Indian economy is generally perceived to be adversely affected if the outsourcing of business from the United States is curtailed or regulated, she reiterated the perspective of the marginalized and dispossessed people. Medha Patkar told Goodman: “But on the other hand, if it really cuts down on outsourcing from countries such as yours, we would be more than happy. Although the immediate impact would be negative, I think the long-term impact would be seen in our coming out with our own indigenous and self-reliant alternatives, which would not be market-based as much as they would be the natural and the human resource-based... So, one has to still wait and watch, because with Obama’s risks taken in economy and polity over here, what the not just United States but also the Western inputs are in the context of this meltdown, are also yet to be seen.”

Medha Patkar also clarified that the struggle with which she is involved is not unique to India alone but is a global phenomenon. Big dams anywhere are a threat to life and the environment everywhere. It needs to be noted that international financial agencies

such as the World Bank have played a crucial role in perpetuating a model of development that is violent and unsustainable. Referring to the withdrawal of the World Bank from the Sardar Sarovar Project, Ms. Patkar noted: "It is certain that the World Bank has not learned a lesson. They were taught the lessons, but they seem to be bad students. What can we do? They are still investing into dams and dams and dams.... giant dams in the northeast of India, over Himalayan rivers, in regions which have interstate flowing rivers bringing in huge reserves of silt, they dabble with glacier changes, changing their paths and changing the direction of water flow. And it's not just climate justice that we want; we want justice on the ground... So, these international financial institutions must be questioned, even by the people here, by raising the question: Where is my dollar going through my shares in the World Bank? I hope Obama takes this issue also as a part of his new development agenda, which we look forward to."

Ultimately, Ms. Patkar cautioned the audience during her MIT lecture, what is required is a *vision* of development. We need to repeatedly ask the question: what is the type of development we need? Today development is a heavily weighted top down program about which the affected people are seldom consulted. In the name of development, forests are cleared, water polluted and the poor evicted from their homes. Rather, we need a form of development from the perspective of the people. The political authorities, the industries and big businesses must to be accountable to the people. That is real democracy in which the people affected by the changes are consulted. Quoting Mahatama Gandhi, Ms. Patkar said: "We have enough resources for the needs of all people, but not for the greed of some."

In her lecture, Ms. Patkar referred to the forthcoming Parliamentary elections in India and the need for social activists to be involved in the political process. She clarified that while electoral politics may not be an option for her and for several others involved in the people's movement, they themselves cannot be indifferent to the political process either. The National Convenors of the National Alliance of People's Movement that met in Nagpur earlier this month identified the following as areas that would require attention in relation to the upcoming elections:

- Records on the present Members of Parliament (Try to identify MPs with criminal records, involvement in corrupt practices, involvement with casteist and communal organizations, those who work as the frontmen of any corporate group - decide on which your group would like to focus amongst these).
- Group / State Units need to prepare a list of general malpractices during elections such as distribution of cash, kind, liquor, booth capturing, delivering communal / casteist speeches, rigging of votes, making false promises or using allurements etc. Do note that after the announcement of elections, no declaration of new schemes can be made by the State / Central Govt. Ministries or politicians.
- Send a list of the NAPM Election Observers (from each state) to the Election Commission of India along with a letter to the State Election Commission to allow association of these persons in the election monitoring process in order to ensure free and fair elections.

In the face of corruption and the influence of big business all around us, it is possible to view efforts such as these as losing battles. The Sardar Sarovar dam is anyway coming up, foot by foot, thanks to the backing of the government and global financial agencies. However, movements such as these have come to symbolize the people's voice against the tyranny of the State and money power. People like Medha Patkar have also helped to mobilize thousands of people around the country - especially the youth - to commit their lives for a cause greater than their own lives. It was amazing to see once again at MIT, how this frail woman could move the audience, more with her deep commitment and passion than any oratory skills. To uphold the life and liberty of the indigenous people of the Narmada valley, she has gone several times in the past on fasts unto death, and has also stood, along with the people, in the rising water of the valley till the police arrested and moved her to safety. And, at MIT yesterday, she seemed clearly uncomfortable with the standing ovation she received.

- *Jesudas M. Athyal*

(The writer is Senior Research Associate in the Pluralism Project at the Harvard University)