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Counterpoint

## **Beware The Fury Of The Oppressed**

**NBA and Medha Patkar have shown exemplary resolve to stay non-violent for so long. Ordinary people lack such courage. With literally no redressal mechanism for the victims of development, charting a violent course becomes an easy route to vent anger and desperation.**

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Medha Patkar's relentless crusade may precipitate into setting up of yet another commission to examine the rehabilitation discrepancies in the controversial Narmada valley; however, it would be illusive for the government to believe that the issue has been resolved. The Prime Minister will be ill-advised into thinking so, as the core issue has been of subverting non-violent movements, of supporting anti-people projects and of unleashing violence of the state.

From the killings in Kalinganagar to repressive firing on Gangavaram port, suppression of people's legitimate rights over their environment, their land, their waters and their forests, has become commonplace. Be it the uprooted adivasis of Kashipur or the bulldozed slum dwellers in Mumbai, there is an integral linkage between such movements that will prove costly if the state were to continuously ignore people's resentment.

It has already proven costly in over 150 districts in the country where small civic oppressions have taken a violent turn, earning the districts the dubious distinction of being 'Naxal-affected'. Whereas part of this growing spread of violent armed action has been attributed to the perceived lack of fair and equitable justice to the poor, the state has been nevertheless perpetuating violence by unleashing police force.

It didn't even leave the peaceful Narmada activists in the capital without a scar: first moving the protestors from the entrance of the water resources ministry and then forcibly taking the fasting activists to the hospital on the pretext of 'saving their lives'. Paradoxically, the government didn't utter a word on saving the lives of those who have been displaced and those who will be submerged once the dam height is raised by another ten meters.

It is no surprise as the government that is buoyed by a 7-8 per cent growth rate promising greater foreign direct investments; and is ecstatic about the raging bull at the stock market indicating better health of the economy, cares less about the voiceless victims at the altar of development. However, widespread protests in the recent past have unveiled the best kept secret of economics that development impoverishes large chunks of the silent majority.

Development projects have displaced an estimated 20 million people in the past five decades in the country and with the Finance Minister having announced 342 new sites for hydel projects and some 148 Special Economic Zones, millions of people are likely to lose customary rights over land, water and forests for their survival and livelihoods. Clearly, there are conditions brewing for an upsurge in Naxalism across several states.

Acceleration of economic growth has created an urban middle class that has been as much detached from the plight of the poor as the government. However, the government, the corporate world – and, indeed, the entire urban middle class – should be under no illusion that one concerted attack from the victims of development can spoil the party. Some infrastructure projects never took off the ground in Bihar on account of mere threats.

The core argument in the ongoing tussle between 'rights' and profits' over natural resources relates to environmental governance. Should the state be allowed to exercise political prudence in locating projects that serve vested interests? Should corporation interests be given precedence over community rights? The Maoist Central Committee has already told journalists that it will hit back at any such area domination exercises.

To evade the core issue, development protagonists including politicians and bureaucrats often take a counter position: would the government be considerate if those who would benefit from the project were to take to the streets like those who have been displaced? Evidently, such positions are afterthoughts that do not account for the fact that the decision to have the project in the first place didn't involve those whose plight is put forth as a plea.

No wonder, large projects continue to remain an epitome of politician-bureaucrat-contractor nexus that take the unsuspecting masses for granted. Rehabilitation has come to stay as a virtual industry that perpetuates corruption at all levels. It doesn't need a degree in economics to confirm that the gains of large projects are always tipped in favour of the capitalist forces, and those who lose the 'free goods of nature' become the ultimate victims of development.

With literally no redressal mechanism for the victims of development in place, charting a violent course becomes an easy route to vent anger and desperation. Even in the case of recent peaceful Narmada protest, the Prime Minister broke his deafening silence and the Water Resources

Minister woke out of slumber only after Medha Patkar's health had deteriorated. Ordinary people lack such resolve to stay non-violent for long.

Crucially, it is the government's inaction that is driving the oppressed to take to arms. Should then the Naxals or Maoists be considered criminals? They fight for a legitimate cause and have a growing number of followers. Unless people are engaged into clarifying their intentions in an open and transparent manner, political decisions backed by corporate interests will continue to nurture violence. This is particularly important in India that has a heavy dependence of people on natural resources for their livelihood. It is in the self interest of the privileged power-class to quickly mend the system before people get compelled to break it.

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