

## CONSERVATION

### THE ANANDWAN RESOLUTION

A fight for survival. A look behind the scenes  
of the document which roused a nation

*"It is the people to whom we must go," said Baba Amte, "Not to the netas." After years of broken promises all who had gathered at Anandwan realised that the people had a right to know and that those who knew had a duty to inform. Floods and drought were sucking the vitals from the Indian people and the destruction of our lands somehow had to be stopped.*

The Anandwan gathering was a result of years of exploitation of the rural hinterland by the urban machine. What was at stake was the very survival of India, for those in control of our land were proceeding to kill it, and they were immune to cries of caution or warning. Having thrown off the British yoke of slavery, our people were now wearing one created by a tiny but powerful minority who demanded 'sacrifices' from their fellow-men for the sake of 'development', but were blind to the basic norms of social justice and environmental common-sense.

Scientists, planners, activists, journalists and politicians came together at Anandwan to draft 'THE ANANDWAN DECLARATION AGAINST BIG DAMS', a turning point in the country's conservation movement. The document was debated, discussed and deliberated upon by people who did not necessarily think alike. Such constructive debate had, unfortunately, vanished from the Indian planning scene in recent years and this was the reason that confrontation and strident protest had now replaced reasoned discussion. In a sense The Anandwan Declaration was to be the cross that all the "environmental pilgrims" who came to Baba Amte's ashram would carry till their task was accomplished.

Why big dams? Because these pose the single largest threat to our remaining natural forests and they also represent the mindless drift towards over-consumption which threatens to engulf India. At the very outset it was decided that since the participants were well versed with the issues at

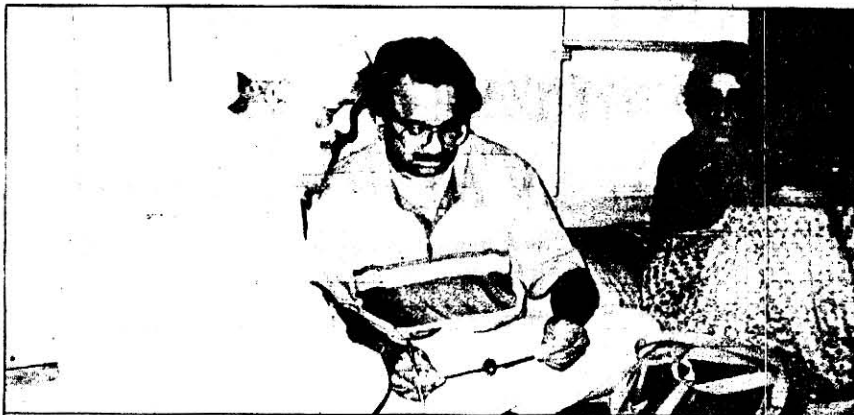
stake, the basics could be skipped. The focus was on specifics. No speeches were delivered, only opinions and suggestions for action. What was refreshing was a tangible, mutual respect for differing views which promises to become the cornerstone of India's new environmental resistance movement.

Baba Amte set the tone and the pattern for the discussion, which took place in a large, well-ventilated hall, with everyone seated on the floor on spotless white sheets. "Exploited people are unable to express dissent," he said. "This makes it necessary to prevent the silent majority from being converted into the silenced majority. The issue involves human rights and the very integrity of our great country."

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A number of problems were brought into sharp focus by the participants. Gadchiroli and several other districts in the heartland of India were under threat as their rivers would be permanently damaged by a series of big dams at Inchampalli, Bhopalpatnam, Gosikhurd, Mogra and Bodhghat. Natural forests and fertile soil, self-dependent tribal lifestyles and wildlife, including the tiger and the severely endangered wild buffalo would be wiped out. Contractors and politicians would make fortunes and the people affected would be left resourceless. This has now become a familiar Indian scenario.

Sunderlal Bahuguna spoke of the Tehri dam, to be built across the Bhagirathi river in spite of the region being prone to earthquakes. Bahuguna warned the gathering of the government's two



*Sunderlal Bahuguna discusses strategy with Thomas Mathew, as Mrs. Kamala Choudhary looks on.*

weapons to break protest movements. These weapons were fear psychosis and greed incentive. While the locals would be terrorised, the technocrats, like the engineers and contractors would benefit monetarily.

Mohan Kumar told us of the Poyamkutty Project in Kerala, a system of nine dams. The first phase of Poyamkutty proper would itself submerge 3,100 hectares of evergreen forests. Besides harbouring several herds of the extremely endangered Asian elephants, the destruction of reed forests would throw over four lakh reed workers out of employment as there is absolutely no alternative supply source for reeds, essential to basket and mat weavers. It is beyond the capability of the government to compensate four lakh people for their loss of remuneration. Such are the short-sighted acts that are devastating our people's lives. No cost-benefit analysis ever takes such factors into account.

In Bihar, Meghnath informed us, the Koel Karo and Kotku dams have already become very controversial. Protestors have been shot. The compensation money, pitifully inadequate to create alternate homes, has been spent on liquor, or has been taken away from people by ever-present sharks on one pretext or the other. Even as hard-headed developers argue that such incidents are not 'their' fault, the affected people have moved into the catchment forests which have begun to buckle under the pressure of over exploitation. This will eventually cause the reservoir to become oversilted thanks to soil erosion. This, of course, is nothing new. It has happened at every dam site thus created in India. And history threatens to repeat itself at the sites of the Narmada, Indravati,

Tehri and other projects. Despite 40 years of Independence our leaders have not seen fit to institute a national rehabilitation policy for those ousted in the name of progress.

Everyone at the gathering agreed that the Declaration should emphasise the right to information. Most social activists were handicapped by official refusal to divulge information about dam projects. Data was classi-

fied as secret to prevent the truth from being exposed. How could a government hide plans to devastate millions of lives and then say it is for the benefit of the masses? The right to information was a priority, indeed a scientific, political and social necessity. Yet, the Gujarat government plans to invoke the Official Secrets Act at the Kevadia dam site, probably to prevent demonstrations!

The principles of distributive justice came into sharp focus. The river systems and freshwater bodies of the country are valuable natural resources. Who has the right to determine their end use? Ideally, it should be the government, but our administration is now in the grip of unprecedented corruption. This necessitates a demand for much closer scrutiny of mega-plans. Every major project must first be discussed and debated with the affected persons and only then must foundation stones be laid.

It was agreed that a national consensus on alternatives to large dams should be sought. India is a country where the rain falls fast and furious for a few short months. The rain water should be caught and held where it falls. This can be the only long-term, sustainable alternative to large dams. The planners' viewpoint, that ten small dams cost more than one big dam, is ill-founded. Their definition of cost is restricted to construction costs alone. When asked about the social and environmental costs they maintain a stony silence. Naturally, small dams too will submerge land, but the impact is such that life forms, including humans, can adjust more easily around the changes. And, equally important, the benefits from such projects are equitably distributed, locally, instead of being siphoned off for consumption in distant urban centres.

Another argument put forward is that large dams are the solution to recurring drought and floods. This is grossly untrue. After construction of over 1,500 large dams, more land in India has become drought and flood-prone than ever before. It was pointed out that small dams, reservoirs, percolation tanks, bunds, check dams, etc. could easily solve the water problems of our people even as they provide employment to millions. Mini-green belts could be created around these small water bodies, thus providing shade and fodder, raising the water table and protecting the soil over vast areas. This step, married to appropriate agriculture techniques such as dry farming and drip irrigation can transform India. Moreover, the problem of drought would begin to be solved from the second year itself instead of making people wait for 20 to 30 years for the ephemeral benefits of large dams.

***"The issue involves human rights and the very integrity of our great country."***

As for the requirements of power, instead of planning new big dams, we should be concentrating on improving the performance of our existing white elephants. Despite our repeated requests, no one has been able to provide us with a single example of a large dam constructed in India which could be held out as a model for development. Not one dam has stayed within the budget. Not one dam has delivered as much as it promised. Every dam has destroyed more property than the builders claimed. Not one dam project has satisfactorily rehabilitated those ousted by it. Every dam will live out its usefulness earlier than anticipated because of siltation. These are not wild accusations, but facts which are being glossed over by our planners today as they sit mesmerised by plans for tomorrow.

Post-facto studies of large dams already built need to be conducted and participants decided that the findings would be made public by the end of 1988. Such studies would concentrate on promises made to justify construction of projects, as against the current realities prevailing at the sites including cost/benefit ratios, siltation rates, rehabilitation, deforestation, catchment conditions, water logging and soil salinity. The smoke screen of compensatory afforestation being put out by funding agencies and government bodies is to be exposed. The loss of genetic diversity and the

tremendous ability of natural plant communities to protect soil cannot be swept aside.

The bottom line is that the Planning Commission must immediately reconsider decisions on big dams. If nothing is done then we would be forced to take every single new large dam project to the courts to ask for intervention in the public interest. NGOs and activists were directed to draw up detailed resource lists of lawyers, engineers, scientists, sociologists and administrators whose consciences could be awakened. They would become the new torch-bearers for a return to environmental sanity.

Coordination between various NGOs would be effected through a simple secretariat, but, as Sunderlal Bahuguna suggested, no 'special' organisation would be created to fight big dams. Instead, existing organisations would network and thus share experiences and strengths. Legal action would be preceded by public education and since our basic premise was so strong, the support of the masses was a foregone conclusion. The challenge was to fight the organised disinformation of the state and to make people aware of the truth. The damaging effects of destructive development would also be aired on an international level to bring pressure to bear on funding agencies like the World Bank. At the very root of our argument was the fact that development itself needed to be redefined. Unless this was done, alternatives to large dams would be discussed within the parameters of an unacceptable model.

Emphasis needs to be laid on the country's diverse ecosystems so that appropriate agricultural techniques and cropping patterns can be identified. Just as the planting of exotics is unwise where social forestry is concerned, so also the growing of sugarcane in parts of Gujarat, or rice in Rajasthan is doomed to failure in the long run. For over 40 years our leaders have mismanaged our land. They have had virtually no opposition. Today, if questions are being asked about the planning process, our leaders should look upon this as a positive sign of the people being involved in building their own future and that of their country, not as an interference or irritant.

Unfortunately, though we want to work together to build a new, better India, we realise that reason, logic and justice take a back seat to political expediency. We must, therefore, expect this to be a long and bitter battle, one which our country cannot afford to lose. □

# THE ANANDWAN DECLARATION

## AN APPEAL TO THE NATION

*Around 80 of us met at Anandwan, at Warora, in the first week of July 1988 to express our grave concern about the devastation caused by big dams. We came from different parts of the country, all united by a common resolve -- to ensure that people were no longer denied their basic rights over natural resources. We affirmed that the nation's rivers are the cradle of our civilisation and that they cannot be strangled to meet the needs of the exploiting class within society.*

*The issues raised by the construction of big dams challenge the very concept of the present pattern of economic growth, unquestioningly adopted by our planners. Nothing less than the survival of life itself is at stake for very many of our people and time is running out rapidly. We appeal to the nation to halt all big dams here and now.*

### THE ANANDWAN DECLARATION

We are opposed to big dams. We consider them symbols of destruction in the name of development. They delude people by promising benefits which do not accrue to them. The reliance on big dams is symptomatic of the unthinking acceptance of the dominant models of economic growth.

There are over 1,500 big dams in the country, none of which has lived up to its expectations.

*\* Instead of all-round prosperity, they have benefited a small number of rich farmers and the urban elite.*

*\* Instead of making the country drought-proof, they have made it drought-prone, mainly through ecologically inappropriate water-intensive farming systems.*

*\* Instead of preventing floods, they have in many instances made areas more flood-prone.*

*\* Instead of improving standards of living*

*in rural areas, they have displaced and impoverished millions of people.*

By relying on big dams, the planners have destroyed the ways of life of the Adivasi communities and hill peoples, and alienated them from the rest of India. This has polarised society and endangered the nation's integrity.

Big dams have led to the wholesale destruction of natural resources, particularly forests, along with their diverse flora and fauna. Often in contravention of the Forest Conservation Act, official agencies start felling trees before a project receives clearance.

Big dams have destroyed the ecology of riverine systems, depriving thousands of farmers and fishermen in downstream areas of their livelihoods. They have led to extensive 'waterlogging and salinisation, turning millions of hectares infertile. In several cases, they have increased the risk of earthquakes.

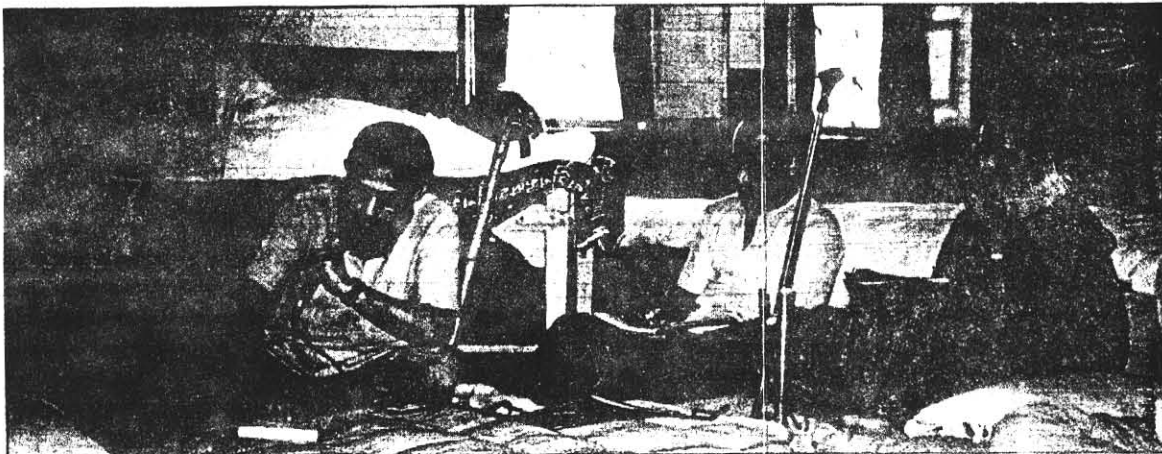
Big dams, especially those located in strategic zones, pose risks to national security. Justified in the name of national interest, they are diametrically opposed to it.

Despite widespread criticism of big dams, projects have been cleared without completing studies by the official agencies themselves (as in Sardar Sarovar and Indira Sagar) or without heeding the findings of committees appointed by the Government (as in Tehri). The Government has also ridden roughshod over all local opposition, specially from Adivasis (as in Suvarnarekha, Bihar).

Under traditional systems of water management, control over natural resources essential to life was in the hands of the community. Through big dams, this control passes to a centralised bureaucracy. Big dams are, at best, a temporary solution to the water crisis facing India today.

We are also against big dams because they corrupt





*Smithu Kothari (with mike), Darryl D'Monte and Medha Patkar address the participants.*

the people and officials and mortgage the nation. The cash compensation paid to oustees can never be a substitute for their hereditary means of livelihood. Till today, oustees have not been accorded justice (as in Bhakra Nangal, Rihand and Koyna).

Officials, engineers and contractors have been lobbying for big dams because it allows them to perpetuate their reign of corruption. The undue reliance on foreign aid and investment for big dams has indebted the country for years to come.

We are distressed at the fact that:

- \* City dwellers are ignorant and indifferent regarding the devastation caused by big dams.
- \* The culture of consumerism promoted by vested industrial and agricultural interests is blinding us to the realities of this crisis.
- \* Most professionals, economists and engineers included, fail to see how the present model of development takes a toll of the environment.
- \* Most bureaucrats turn a deaf ear to the pleas of sanity raised by environmentalists.
- \* Most politicians look only to short-term gains and ignore the larger havoc caused by big dams.

We call for a moratorium on big dams. All projects on which construction has not begun should be scrapped. All work should be suspended in projects where it has already started, and a fresh holistic appraisal should be made by an independent body with representatives of peoples' organisations. Cost-benefit analysis, including comprehensive social and ecological

impacts should be conducted afresh on projects already completed. Where people have been displaced, they must be comprehensively rehabilitated. Under no circumstances can people be denied the right to life and livelihood.

There are alternatives to big dams. In most instances, peoples' needs can be met by trapping water where it falls, and by small bunds and reservoirs. This also calls for different agricultural and energy systems, like small hydroelectric schemes.

Ultimately, the entire planning process has to be reversed, whereby each village becomes a unit, and decisions regarding its development are made by the people, taking the resources provided by the specific ecosystem into account. The watershed has to be the next unit of planning, where once again the entire planning process must be in the hands of the people.

Development and protection of the environment will then proceed hand in hand, and industrialisation will grow in response to people's demands.

The people have a right to know everything about a project which affects them. They should have access to all documents now denied them under the pretext of confidentiality. The people should also have a right to participate in the decision-making process at every stage.

There has to be some control over the consumption of natural resources like forests and water to enable these to be used on a sustainable basis. At present rates of exploitation, we are robbing future generations of their inheritance and survival.



*Baba Amte: "The silent majority will become a silenced majority if we do not speak now"*

There has also to be a more equitable distribution of vital natural resources like water and energy between and within urban and rural populations. A society is ultimately judged by the manner in which it treats its most vulnerable citizens. The present inequitable distribution leads not only to the impoverishment of villagers but also contaminates the environment.

The cropping pattern encouraged by big dams, as seen in the Green Revolution, is not sustainable. The present pattern of land use has helped only the rich farmers while marginalising the poor.

Compensatory afforestation can never provide a substitute for a natural forest.

Can we remain silent spectators to this destruction? No, we will not let time pass us by. We must decide today to join the struggle against big dams which are making the tribals and hill people, the victims of a wider conspiracy.

We will attempt to awaken all sections of society including those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of so-called development.

Towards this task, let us start spanning out in villages and cities all over the country in every form available to us. Let us involve hundreds and thousands of the poor and the rich, cultivators and labourers, entrepreneurs and craftspeople, a massive cadre committed to this cause. But even this may not be enough to halt and reverse the juggernaut of "development". This may not stop the pillage of the wealth of generations by a handful of the elite and therefore let us go to each and every

dam site. We will join such struggles as those at Koel Karo, Tehri and Pooyamkutti, through exhibitions, demonstrations, *dharnas* and such actions. Let us gather in large numbers, at each dam site, and with our gradually increasing strength, let us halt them.

Very soon, on one such dam site, we will demonstrate the collective strength of our campaign and lay the foundation of a nationwide movement against big dams.

Come, let us commit not only our voices but our lives to this struggle.



*Anil Aggarwal: "Politicians generally do not look beyond five years."*