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# Analysis of the roles of Baba Amte and Medha Patkar as Social Reformers in India

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## Abstract:

India is famous for a variety of reasons to the world - its religious and cultural diversity, the varied cuisine, and its hospitable citizens. Being home to 1.38 billion people, the social evils faced by the country are also extremely diverse. In a less than ideal situation, social workers and reformers have played a huge role in fighting these very evils over the years, leading to the upliftment of many weaker sections of society. We will be discussing two social workers, prominent in the late 20th century-early 21st century : Baba Amte and Medha Patkar. We will also be closely analysing their work together on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. A small introduction to these highly renowned social workers. Baba Amte was a lawyer who was widely famous in India and abroad for his work on rehabilitation and work with leprosy patients. He later also moved to support and protest for the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Medha Patkar was a PhD scholar from Tata Institute of Social Sciences(TISS) when she worked with the people affected by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. She eventually ended up leaving her PhD and founded the Narmada Bachao Movement. She also worked in numerous pro-poor housing projects and anti-urban restructuring protests but we will be focussing mainly on her work in the NBA.

## Literature Review:

A comparison drawn between the methods and efforts of social workers is of great research interest. We will be referring to the previous research done on the two social workers to assist us in accomplishing this.

### Baba Amte

According to the Wisdom of Song, Murlidhar Devidas Amte, more famously known as Baba Amte was initially a lawyer by profession. Distasteful about the high charging nature of his job, his initial efforts at helping others around him started with defending pro-bono legal cases for underprivileged people. For instance, he assembled Indian lawyers to provide free legal assistance to freedom fighters who had been jailed by the British and denied a fair trial. He defended and regulated the rights of weavers and sweepers, while looking after his family property in Warora.

Baba evaluated and analyzed numerous ways to cater to the underprivileged groups while being the member of the corporation. He also started an inter-caste community where he assembled families of various communities on a piece of land given to him by a friend.

Brahmins, harijans, beggars and cobblers coexisted there, worked together and cultivated the land. The local community was sold the produce. He was discouraged for his initiatives by others but Baba meticulously continued working.

Baba's decision to dedicate his life to fighting the war against leprosy started with his free legal aid only. While researching for one of the cases he took for the sweeper<sup>1</sup> of the Warora Municipal Corporation, he came across a man in the last stages of leprosy. He concentrated on familiarizing himself with leprosy. He read whatever books he could get on the nature of the disease, the historical accounts of society's treatment of leprosy patients and about people who had sacrificed their lives in the service of leprosy patients. Realising he needed to learn more to help people with a disease as serious as leprosy, he even did a course on it at the Calcutta School of Medicine. Observing a leprosy clinic gave him the clarity on the work needed for the betterment of the patients.

Leprosy patients not only suffer from the excruciating physical toll that the disease takes on their body but also the societal stigma and indigence that is forced upon them by the society. They are in a state of trauma and fear on return from their treatment to their families. The cure<sup>1</sup> was delayed by throwing away the medicines and thereby their return to society. The patients dreamt of a place where they could lead normal lives and recover from the physical and the post psychological trauma of the disease.

Their life at the clinics was further aggravated. He noticed that the existence of the patients was mere. There was a gradual shift in roles from being contributors of the society to becoming welfare fanatics. Charity in the form of food, medicine and shelter was considered desirable. They always had a feeling of deprivation of freedom and privacy. Further, women patients were deprived of privacy in particular. Baba<sup>1</sup> was deeply afflicted and realized the requirement of a distinct surrounding for everyone to live as one family, accompanied with opportunities and receive support and care including their freedom and privacy. He felt that new opportunities should be introduced for the leprosy patients<sup>1</sup> that helps them acquire new skills to earn their livelihood. He made efforts to convince the existing leprosy clinics to incorporate and implement<sup>6</sup> this approach in their treatment of patients. He was supported by only one clinic. Some leprosy patients themselves displayed a keen interest in his initiatives. The assurance of freedom, fresh air and dignity was appealing to them. They expressed their desire to join Baba and support him in his attempts. (Swamy R., 1990)

<sup>7</sup>  
According to the International Leprosy Association, 250 acres of scrubland donated by the Maharashtra government. Amte, who was now called 'Baba' (father), named the place Anandwan, or Garden of Joy, which he described as "an outcast land for outcast people." Together, they turned these barren acres into a successful example of rural development and community living. Established Maharogi Sewa Samiti together, the first dedicated leprosy care centre. It became a sanctuary for the outcast leprosy patients.

After Anandwan, Baba Amte established two more ashrams, Ashokwan and Somnath.

Medha Patkar:

Medha Patkar's initial contributions started as a PhD scholar at TISS. While working for one of her research projects, she came into contact with one of the families displaced by the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. This was the turning point for her as she decided to get involved against the project in whatever way she could. Medha Patkar's work in Gujarat began with the Ahmedabad-based organization called Centre for Social Knowledge and Action – Ahmedabad, commonly known as SETU. She was asked to survey the affected villages to confirm whether people were informed about the impact of the Narmada Valley Development Project/Plan and aware of their rights as displaced people. As an action researcher, she visited Nandurbar District to conduct a survey of the affected communities. Her first impression of the adivasi communities was one of a lack of information and knowledge about the Sardar Sarovar Project and its impacts.

The NBA, a broad-based participatory movement, flourished under the leadership of visionary environmental champions. One of India's most vibrant and best known living activists, Medha Patkar has led the Narmada movement for over two decades. Her uncompromising stance against government apathy toward the human and social costs of dam construction and her ongoing efforts to ensure that transparency and accountability remain hallmark features of development projects have helped fashion the NBA into one of the most dynamic social movements of our time.

(Pawar & Pulla, 2016)

Medha Patkar used the methods of community organization and social action to mobilize the communities and win the hearts of women, children, and men living in the Narmada Valley and beyond. By bringing together hundreds of local groups and organizations, Medha Patkar established and spearheaded one of the largest non-violent social movements in existence

Alongside Medha Patkar, social activist Baba Amte provided moral leadership to the cause to preserve the Narmada River. Even though he was famous across India for his fight against leprosy, starting from early 1980s he involved himself in the endeavour against mega dams. He started with the publication of his book Cry O Beloved Narmada in 1989 and eventually ended up living at the banks of the Narmada to fight the cause.

Patkar and Amte working together managed to hold numerous protests against the government. In September 1989, Amte led a 60,000-person anti-dam NBA rally in Harsud—a town of 20,000 people in Madhya Pradesh that faced submersion. In December 1990, Amte, along with 5,000 protestors, began the Narmada Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatr, marching over a hundred kilometers from Amte's headquarters near Barwani in Madhya

Pradesh to Ferkuva on the Madhya Pradesh–Gujarat border. Following the government's announcement that rising waters from the dam would begin to submerge villages, domestic protest intensified and with it the resulting backlash from the state. On January 5, 1991, Amte began a fast unto death.

#### International Intervention:

In addition to working with the Environmental Defense Fund, the NBA partnered with numerous other human rights, environmental, and solidarity organizations overseas.<sup>88</sup> A Narmada International Action Committee—consisting of NGOs from India, the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and Japan—lobbied against the Narmada Project in several investing countries,<sup>89</sup> which helped focus international and national attention on the Narmada issue.

There were important global implications of Andolan's success. Apart from the wide endorsement this struggle received by countries and coalitions across the map, this successfully led to the formation of the World Commission on Dams probing into the roles played and the necessity of dams with Medha Patkar as the commissioner. It also led to the replanning by the World Bank in its funding policies for underdeveloped countries.

The NBA's success in compelling action from the World Bank depended on its ability to force the Bank to acknowledge the Indian government's disregard for the Narmada Project's consequences. Nationally, amidst increasing consciousness about environmental issues among India's urban middle classes and rural lower classes, Narmada became a symbol of the debate over the place of the most vulnerable members of Indian society in the country's political and economic order. Internationally, the Narmada Project was seen as an effective hook for campaigning against the social and environmental impact of Bank projects.

#### Arguments:

##### Medha Patkar

During her interactions with the inhabitants of the Narmada valley, Patkar realised how grossly uninformed the people were about the effects of the dam on their lives. This made her comprehend the importance of raising awareness among the affected communities. Establishing dialogue with the community, she listened to the questions posed by them like a good social worker. A major impact this had was that this made her understand the part mass mobilization would play in this struggle.

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Medha Patkar learned that the only information they had been given was that the dams would be built and people in the area would be displaced. Medha Patkar also found out that the residents had not seen any plans of the dam and rehabilitation nor had they been briefed by any representative, as was claimed by the local governments. She carefully listened to their questions and concerns about their rights as well as their outrage at the situation.

She questioned the western ideologies towards development and their long-term sustainability. There was already talk about the building of a dam and people were preparing to move. She started developing local residents' organizations following a simple locality development model of community organizing. Medha Patkar initially worked toward achieving the best compensation scenarios for the residents.

Medha Patkar used the methods of community organization and social action to mobilize the communities. Social action and advocacy are the main strategies in Medha Patkar's work. A distinct element of her campaign is the use of satyagraha/social action methods, founded on the principle of non-violent resistance.

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Using the law to their advantage, the NBA went to court. In May 1994, NBA took the case to stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to India's Supreme Court. In January 1995, the Supreme Court put a stay on further construction of the half-built dam and tried to forge consensus between the central and state governments. While state governments continue to push for an increase in the height of the dam, displaced tribals carry on with mass protests.

Baba Amte

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Patients were treated as social rejects and families tried to hide the fact that their family members had leprosy. When this became difficult, they disowned the patient, lest the whole family should come in for ridicule and social boycott. Overnight, the patient would lose his dignity, his self-respect and his family all aspects so vital for his social survival.

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Baba took upon himself to help leprosy patients at a time when society's perception of the disease was extremely close minded and negative. Baba realised the psycho social help that the leprosy patients needed from the societal stigma and alienation that they were forced into.

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Baba realised that building a community would be a Experience so far indicated that leprosy was being treated for its physical manifestation alone. Leprosy patients suffered equally if not more from the social stigma and deprivation that society forced on them. They even dreaded returning to their homes after treatment. Some of them threw away their medicines hoping to delay the cure and thereby their return to



society. The patients, in general, longed for a place where they could recover from the physical as well as psychological trauma of the disease and then return to normal lives.

Baba tried to introduce new methods as research for the emancipation and improved treatment of the leprosy patients to various clinics and eventually in the ashrams he opened for them. Opening Anandwan for marginalised people was a groundbreaking step by Baba Amte. This way, he not only managed to provide a safe haven and a dignified life, but also created a sense of purpose and belonging among the community members. Anandwan allowed Baba to provide both curative and developmental social work services to the inhabitants.

### Conclusion:

A detailed look at the work done and the methods used by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte helped us shed light on the impact their work has had on the respective target groups and to society in general. Clear similarities can be seen in their work as both used community mobilization and action to achieve the targets they set.

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