

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 sweepers 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 return from their treatment to their families. The cure 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 recuperate 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 was deeply afflicted and realized the requirement of a distinct surrounding for everyone to come together as one family, and receive support and care including their freedom and privacy. He realized that new opportunities should be introduced for the leprosy patients that helps them acquire new skills to earn their livelihood. He made efforts to convince the existing leprosy clinics to incorporate and implement this idea as a part of their treatment. He was supported by only one clinic. Few leprosy patients displayed great interest in his initiatives. The assurance of freedom, natural air and prestige was appealing to them. They asserted their desire to accompany Baba and support him in his attempts. (Swamy R., 1990)

According to the International Leprosy Association, 250 acres of scrubland donated by the Maharashtra government. Baba and his wife together turned this scrubland into a developed community with activities like farming and cattle ranches providing the inhabitants with an opportunity to earn a livelihood and not depend on charity. He also managed to build a clinic and secure the services of a full time nurse to cater to the medical needs of the patients.

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 concerned villages to confirm that people were well informed regarding the impact of the Narmada Valley Development Project/Plan and familiar with their rights as displaced people. As an action researcher, she visited Nandurbar District to conduct a survey of the affected communities. Her initial impression of the adivasi communities was one of a lack of information and knowledge about the Sardar Sarovar Project and the human and social impacts.

(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 Yatra, 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.

The NBA collaborated with several solidarity, environmental and human rights organizations alongside in partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund. The 88A Narmada International Action Committee comprising of NGOs from the United States, India, Europe,

Canada, Japan, and Australia pressed against the Narmada Project in several investing countries, which assisted them to bring both the international and national consideration on the Narmada issue.

The Andolan had a significant global impact. 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.

Arguments:

During her interactions with the inhabitants of the Narmada valley, Patkar realised how grossly uninformed the people were about the rehabilitation program and in general 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.

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. A distinct element of her campaign is the use of satyagraha/social action methods, founded on the principle of non-violent resistance. Using advocacy as a tool for justice, the NBA sued the government to obtain a stay order on further construction

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 took upon himself to assist people infected with leprosy 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. Leprosy ensured the loss of self respect and family life of the infected people. Baba realised that building a community of these outcasted people would be

an extremely helpful tool for the rehabilitation from the psychological trauma induced and to bring a sense of normalcy to their 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. While the NBA is an ongoing struggle against the government with Medha Patkar still spearheading the campaign, Baba Amte's life's work has led to people being much more informed about leprosy with many more medical services at their disposal. The ashrams he opened are still being run till date.

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