

REPORT OF THE FIVE-MEMBER TEAM FROM POWU TO ASSESS THE CONDITIONS OF THE WORKFORCE ENGAGED AT THE CONSTRUCTION-SITE OF THE Rs.13,500 CRORE SARDAR SAROVAR PROJECT (SSP) IN THE NANDOD TALUKA OF GUJARAT'S BHARUCH DISTRICT. THE TEAM, COMPRISING ADVOCATE/TRADE UNIONIST SANJAY SINGHVI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST DEEPA BALSAVAR, SOCIAL SCIENTIST KALA RAO, RURAL COMMUNITY ORGANISER, S. GANESH AND POWU CONVENOR SAROSH BANA, TOURED THE REGION ON APRIL 2/3, SATURDAY/SUNDAY, 1988.

INTRODUCTION :

BEFORE considering the question of the workers, it is pertinent to recognise the magnitude of the SSP, which will be the largest of the 30 major dams contemplated on the 1312 km. long westward-draining Narmada River. These 30 major dams, together with 135 medium and around 3000 minor weirs, will constitute the ambitious Narmada Valley Project (NVP), the most expansive riverine scheme ever envisaged anywhere. The NVP is proposed to cost Rs.25,000 crores (by 1981 prices), but this figure is very likely to soar threefold on account of price escalation.

The SSP since will uproot 1.7 lakh habitants from 237 villages - 182 of them in Madhya Pradesh, 36 in Maharashtra and 19 in Gujarat - and submerge 39,134 hectares of forests and arable lands. The entire NVP was anticipated to displace some 1.5 million people, most of them vulnerable tribals, and inundate a cumulative 5.5 lakh hectares of forest tracts and cultivated lands.

SALIENT FEATURES :

The dam wall of the SSP will be a gravity mass concrete structure 1210 metres long and rising to a height of 129 metres above the riverbed. As much as 68 lakh cubic metres of concrete will go into its erection, which is progressing at a furious pace at present. This barrage, alongwith the other behemoth, the Rs. 2480 crore Narmada Sagar Project (NSP) in Madhya Pradesh's Khandwa District, was accorded clearance on April 13, 1987, by a special committee chaired by Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, over-riding the vehement reservations expressed by the Union Government's own Department of

Environment. The Department calculated the environmental costs - if such costs can ever be computed in cold economic terms - of the SSP alone at about Rs. 8190 crores.

The project, located 5.6 km. upstream from Navagam Village and 120 km upstream from Bharush, will be partially funded by the Washington-based World Bank. The dam and power components will receive IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) loan and IDA (International Development Association) credit totalling \$. 300 Million to be disbursed over a period of 110 months. The 445 km long lined main canal - extending upto the Rajasthan-Gujarat border - and the 31-branch distribution system will receive an IDA credit for \$.150 million spread over 36 months. For the reversible generating units of the riverbed powerhouse, the project was expected to be allocated Yen credit from Japan equivalent to approximately Rs.150 crores.

EXPLOITATION OF WORKERS :

A publicity announcement prepared last August by the advertising agency, Lintas India, on behalf of its clients, Jaiprakash Industries Limited (JIL) - headquartered in JA House, 63 Basant Lok, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi 110 057 - mentioned that completing the SSP within the stipulated period of 110 months from the time of award of the contract - April 24, 1987 - will be the firm's "Contribution to the welfare of people of that region and to the nation building task". Readers are rarely inclined to see beyond such self-serving gloss packaged into high-sounding press statements. In its attitude towards its workers, Jaiprakash Associates (JA), the Engineering Division of JIL which was awarded the Rs. 320 crore contract, has hardly lived up to its avowed concern for 'people's welfare'. And surely there are far better ways of building nations than the questionable approach adopted by this giant industrial enterprise. The company's record speaks for itself.

When asked, for instance, about the arbitrary transfer orders issued to certain workmen deemed recalcitrant, JA executive director (technical) D.G. Kadkade explained rather matter-of-factly: "If in a family of four sons, one is found incompatible in nature,

it is necessary to shift him out to restore harmony in the household. The same is true in the case of employees in a company". Also interviewed were general manager (L) Mohan Mishra, a former Indian Police Service (IPS) official, general manager (finance and administration) R.N. Rao, personnel manager, K.L.Duggal and B.N. Jha, Liaison Officer, Project Office of JA.

Three workers, Anil Kumar Singh, Satnarain Dube and Rohini Prasad Upadhyay, who were preparing to mobilise their colleagues for the Bharat Bandh sponsored by the national opposition parties on March 15, 1988, were issued transfer orders that night which they refused to accept, said Thakorebhai Shah, a veteran Seva Dal Volunteer and general secretary of the Vadodara Kamgar Union (VKU). The union was around six months ago influenced by a legal aid centre at Rajpipla, 32 km away from the SSP's damsite at Kevadia, to organise the workforce and has subsequently been active in the area ever since. Shah pointed out that the transfer orders were illegal as the names of the three workmen were on a list of 'protected workers' which had been handed over to Baroda's Labour Commissioner by the VKU.

The three were then allegedly detained in the company's conference room in the presence of Rajpipla's Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) R.J. Patel, and Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Gadvi, and Police Sub-Inspector (PSI) N.B.Jadeja of Kevadia, who were called by the company officials as they anticipated 'disorder'. During interrogation, the DSP was reported to have pointed his revolver at the three detenus threatening to shoot if they did not sign their transfer orders. They were coerced into signing them, bundled into a van, driven to the Baroda Railway station and warned against returning to work, said Anil Kumar Singh. It was reported that the van was escorted part of the way upto Dabhoi by the vehicles of the PSI and the SDM.

Noting the overwhelming response to the Bharat Bandh call and the widespread indignation against the forced transfers, the management beefed up security at the premises. Since that day, workers spoken to at the damsite indicated, mobile police patrols

have been maintaining constant vigil in the area and workers venturing out of their hovels at night have been accosted and questioned. Routinely, the company's hirelings masquerading as security personnel would monitor the movements of suspected workers, even resorting to eavesdropping on their conversations. In fact, a supervisor at the damsite kept interrupting the conversation between the POWU members and the labourers, and insisted on knowing the names of those workmen the team was intending to meet.

Baroda-based journalist Ajay Skaria mentions that the area of the dam had been declared protected back in 1969, and this declaration was now being used to prevent the workers from moving freely and organising themselves. Such a clampdown had also been imposed since the January 30 rally of the project-affected people when the Government had sought to prevent protestors from Maharashtra from crossing over the border. From the numerous instances reported, it was manifest that the Jaiprakash group wielded tremendous influence over the Government and transgressed norms with impunity, confident that no action would be forthcoming.

Workers attending a meeting with VKU's Shah at Baroda District's Bhadarwa village on April 3 morning told the POWU team that a number of their colleagues had been prevented from coming to the venue by pickets of police stationed along the roads. Some alleged that the police also stopped public buses and asked the workers to disboard. From the temple of Narmada Mata on the hill where the meeting took place, one could see company cars and Jeeps of JP parked on the roadside, the occupants maintaining surveillance on the proceedings. A drunken tribal leader from the vicinity, Dinesh Tadvi, and a few of his associates had been sent to the meeting by the company to create commotion and disrupt the gathering.

Around 2000 temporary labourers or daily wage earners live outside the campsite, while the 750 skilled workers, including 200 mechanical staff, 130 supervisors, 150 drivers and 60 operators live on the campus. We were informed by the management that 80 per cent of the unskilled labour was 'Local', the rest being migrant workers mainly from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

They also claimed that 10 per cent of the skilled sector was 'local' a term which was expanded in scope to include the entire Gujarati linguistic group from various parts of the State.

A large number of the workers contacted cited grave labour malpractices by the JP management. Many were severely overworked but denied overtime compensation. Drivers, for instance, have been made to work as many as 36 hours at a stretch with little respite, especially during the summer and premonsoon months. The VKU has filed claims for overtime amounting to over Rs. 24 lakhs.

Shah said that in February, 1987, 50 workers, among them 47 drivers, were asked to go on leave with the assurance they would be recalled when their services were required. The workers demanded, however, that they be issued notices declaring they were on forced leave and part of their salaries for that period be reimbursed to them. Alternatively, the company should arrive at a final settlement with them and pay them all their dues. The management, it was reported, rejected these terms and turned them out.

Later, 43 of them were said to have been coaxed back into service when they threatened to file cases demanding their complete overtime and other dues. Seven others, Shah narrated, held their ground and went to court and the hearings in their case were in progress. Some of them have claimed total compensations ranging from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 1.7 lakh for the overtime and work they did and a victory for them would inspire a host of similar cases by other workers who have been wronged.

This frenzy of the company to extract maximum labour with minimum compensation stems from its avid desire to abide by the contract with the Gujarat Government which contains stiff penalty clauses for delays. Indeed, JP Associates prides itself on the fact that it has completed several works ahead of schedule. For example, the Rs. 25.7 crore guide bund and south approach bank of the road bridge across the Brahmaputra River was completed seven months before the deadline as also the Rs. 47 crore 100 metre high concrete gravity Karjan dam not far from the SSP.

It is possible that this cherished pace leads to frequent

flouting of safety principles and major flaws in construction. The Karjan dam is said to be leaking already. And five workers died and a score injured when a scaffolding on the dam wall collapsed as it was made of pipes of a diameter smaller than required and not affixed to the wall.

In the SSP itself, it was found that the site selected for the location of the dam had a stratum of red bole and argillaceous limestone, said to be a weak rock structure, beneath the bedrock which could have soaked up the impounded water and caused a devastating upheaval in the dam. Instead of relocating the scheme, the authorities bored a shaft to the level of the weak layer, excavated radial tunnels and poured in 2 lakh cubic metres of mortar in an attempt to consolidate the foundation, a procedure technically known as grouting. The dam is coming up on this ground. Independent sources pointed out that minors were engaged to undertake the grouting since it was easier for children, on account of their size, to operate in the tunnels and shafts.

The officials specified, however, that their construction operations were amazingly free of mishaps. They conceded nonetheless that most of the fatal accidents on site were road accidents, involving runovers rather than site accidents. Sources claimed that several of those maimed or killed in such mishaps had been openly critical of the company. The last such tragedy, in December 1987, involved a Government-appointed engineer, Sutar, said to be an upright individual who showed concern for labour and construction norms.

Anticipating eventual sanction to the project, JP Associates, with the tacit approval of the Gujarat administration, commenced groundwork in the area already in 1979. Within a year of operation, some sections of the workers had reason to feel aggrieved, particularly on the issues of overtime, provident fund and bonus, and resentment simmered within their ranks. At least three of them who attempted to unionise the workers were threatened with dismissal. They sought refuge at a legal aid centre at Rajpipla but subsequently turned renegades and were resettled by the company in Madhya Pradesh, said a volunteer at the centre. By end 1981, a reporter from the

Delhi office of a national daily who was sympathetic to the firm visited the area. In a front page article which appeared on December 8, he held the centre's volunteer responsible for the 'disappearance' of the three labour leaders and even implied that he had killed them and disposed of their bodies, the volunteer, who is an advocate specialising in civil liberties, recalled.

Last year, a worker called Shambhu Tiwari had been on leave when he fell ill and could return to work only after about five months. He was dismissed and when he pleaded for reinstatement, he was assured he would be if he submitted his resignation. When he did, he was told that the resignation settled matters and he was not eligible for another job or monetary compensation. Backed by the VKU, Tiwari went to court. It was reported that Nageshwar and Dayashankar, his two brothers who also worked at Kevadia, were persuaded by the management to have their brother withdraw the case. When they refused, they were also removed from service. They too filed a case in court.

In January this year, when Nageshwar entered the Kevadia area to meet with some workers, he was allegedly set upon by a company guard and brutally beaten, requiring hospitalisation. It was found that a case of molestation of a woman had been filed against him by the guard at the Kevadia police station. Nageshwar related that when he went to lodge a complaint at the police station, the staff on duty refused to register it and instead arrested him on the charge of attempted rape. Shah had to rush down from Baroda and obtain his release from bail.

A year ago, another worker, Sugar Singh, whose services had been terminated, joined his former co-workers for a drink at an illicit liquor den at Kevadia. (Prohibition is in force in Gujarat). Shah alleged that another worker, Rajinder Singh, a union organiser who subsequently became a turncoat, also joined them and picked up a quarrel with Sugar Singh in which he assaulted the latter ruthlessly. Police once again refused to entertain the victim's complaint and instead registered the one filed against him on charges of drinking.

Bombay-based journalist Achin Vanaik reported that the Company approached farmers in Vadgam village, 11 km from Kevadia as it required topsoil from their farms. The topsoil was supposed to

have been required for the four rockfill dykes it was constructing in the head reach of the Narmada main canal. He reported that some of the farmers did not comply and the company retaliated by having its heavy vehicles driven through their fields and mounds of gravel and construction wastes dumped on them. The case of the farmers reached the Supreme Court which appointed a two-member inquiry committee comprising a husband and wife team of social workers. The panel found the firm guilty on all major counts and violating an earlier court injunction against the dumpings.

Though industrial regulations confer permanency on employees who have worked a minimum 240 days for a particular enterprise, JP Associates have been known to engage workers on temporary basis as many as 18 years after service with the intention of denying them the dues and benefits given to permanent employees. The VKU claims to already have as many as 750 of the workers as its members and is in the process of galvanising the others in an effort to safeguard their interest. The management, which stressed to us it had nothing against the workers unionising themselves, has in fact brazenly shown the lengths it was prepared to go to impede just such moves.

Apart from the enormous environmental damage the SSP will wreak and the blatant violation of resettlement terms pertaining to the large number of evacuees, this another sordid dimension to the construction of this 'developmental project' makes one question the Government's strategy for development. Is the SSP worth this wanton destruction, misery and suffering? What criteria determine who has to suffer so that others may enjoy the touted benefits of such projects?

The SSP epitomises the Government's utter disregard for the vulnerable sections of society and its enchantment with schemes which spell lucre and self-aggrandizement for those in power. There is need to question the policy. And there is greater and urgent need for voluntary organisations to inquire into this policy.

The Sardar Sarovar Project is an apt starting point.

The Forum for People-Oriented Water Utilisation (POWU)
C/o. Ms Kiran More
92, Mistry Park,
B.Desai Road,
Bombay-400 036.