

**Kaise Jeebo Re? How shall we survive?**  
**A Documentary by Anurag Singh and Jharana Jhaveri**

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This is not a review, but a look at the context and content of the film. If, as the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, then in a 1000-2000 word article, you could at best describe one or two frames or stills in a film. Thus, here is a peek at the documentary and some of the thoughts it provoked in me.

The Narmada valley dam project is perhaps the single most expensive project (cost estimate = Rs. 40,000 crores) ever undertaken by the Indian government. Over 3000 dams, of which more than 30 are large dams, are being constructed. Not surprisingly, the publicity campaign in support of the dams has also been a mammoth exercise. The authorities keep showing pictures of green fields and smiling farmers, brightly lit cities and canals filled with water. But one part of the picture is clearly missing - the part with the millions of people who live in the area now, whose current lifestyle is due to be, and has already in large part been, wiped out by the construction of these dams.

If, as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India suggested, dams are the temples of modern India, then these people are surely the sacrifices made at the altar of the gods and goddesses of "progress" that sit in those temples. Not symbolic oblations of flowers and coconuts, but real human sacrifices. But, unlike the old days, when the piety or wealth of a devotee were measured, and hence loudly proclaimed, in terms of the size of the retinue of goats offered, the high priests of these modern temples would do everything to hide the plight of these victims.

Today, the Narmada is not alone in being dammed against the wishes of the people who live in the region. The other large dam being constructed in a dangerous seismic zone is the Tehri dam. As I started writing this, one of the well known leaders of the Chipko movement, Sunderlal Bahuguna, was on a fast unto death asking for the construction to be halted while a careful review of the consequences of the project is carried out. After much delay, his demand has been partially accepted.

Nor are these controversial projects only of recent origin. Since independence, India has built over 3500 large dams - over 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world's large dams. These are estimated to have caused the displacement - and consequent destruction of lifestyles and cultures - of about 30 million people. Over 80% of these are dalits and tribals, for the protection of whose rights the constitution of India has recommended special provisions (schedules). But, in the name of development and national interest, the rights of these indigenous peoples have been discounted.

Since the early eighties, as plans for and construction of dams in the Narmada valley proceeded, there has been a huge people's movement against this project. Spearheaded by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), this movement has succeeded, at least, in

articulating the voices of these peoples and bringing the nation's, if not the world's, attention to bear on the happenings here. In 1993, due to growing opposition to the project, the World Bank, one of the major funding agencies involved in the project, was forced to pull out. Prior to that, however, more than half the money spent on the project came from the World Bank. Construction of the Sardar Sarovar, the biggest of the dams in the valley and the second largest in the world, has proceeded at a slackened pace.

In 1989, the first dam of this mega-project was completed at Bargi. The dam, which is 69 m high and 5 km long, submerges over 300 square kilometers of land, where formerly over a 100,000 people lived. These people, who received little or no compensation, now roam the streets of many of India's urban centers; some pull rickshaws; some are hired by commercial fishing contractors catching fish in the same river that they fished for themselves in return for a pittance of a wage; some others beg. All of them bemoan the loss of their original lands where they were the masters.

It is this milieu that Anurag and Jharana document through their film. The documentary was produced over six years; more than 200 hours of footage were shot either in the towns and cities where the displaced have moved to or in the Narmada Valley. Both film makers are well suited to this project - and it shows.

Anurag Singh has been making films addressing political, environmental and social issues since 1984. Among his films are "Manibeli" which chronicles the police repression of the people in Manibeli village, the first village of Maharashtra State to be submerged by the controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam; and, "Battle for Peace" on Burmese students exiled in India. Jharana Jhaveri has been involved with human rights, labor and environmental movements since her days as a student. Among her films are "Angan Manch" about women's participation in a movement for self-empowerment in the interior villages of South Bihar; and, "Devdasi" which follows a girl's journey from temples to brothel houses in the age-old religious practice of dedicating young girls to the Goddess Yellamma.

Kaise Jeebo Re ultimately aims to tell the story of the victims through their own words. And, to the surprise of people like me who expected otherwise, they are very articulate in telling their story. They are angry, they are bitter, they laugh, and they cry, all the time involving us in their emotions.

In one of the interesting scenes in the film, some of them, living in very squalid surroundings for no fault of theirs, gather one evening and sing and dance around a fire. It is this song that gives the film its title.

The forest drowned  
Our lands drowned  
Our little world submerged  
Oh brother! How shall we survive?  
The Bargi dam has been filled  
Oh brother! How shall we survive?

Gave us crumbs as compensation  
Made us damn fools  
Oh brother! Made us damn fools  
Look at us, our limbs dismembered  
We have become idle ghosts  
The Bargi dam has been filled  
Oh brother! How shall we survive?

Another scene: In the 1950s, Pt. Nehru visited the area. In order to create space for his helicopter to land, the local government officials cleared fields that were loaded with crops almost ready to be harvested in a few weeks. As compensation, they offered the cultivators merely Rs. 80-90 per acre. In order to make the people accept this deal, the local government official wined and dined the village sarpanch (headman), who feeling duly honoured, agreed without a murmur and got all the villagers to sign the relevant documents. The description of these events, combined with acting out the relevant parts, by one of the victims of the Bargi dam makes us both laugh and cry at the same time. It is amazing to see these people who have been subjected to so much hardship laugh about all this; it is also amazing to see their acting skills.

While the sympathies of the film makers is seldom suspect, the documentary also presents the view point of the pro-dam activists in a convincing, honest manner (more on this in the interview). They, by and large, articulate what many of us have been exposed to for the most part. But in doing so after showing the victims of these supposedly developmental projects, the film raises several important questions in the minds of the viewers like me.

Most of us (Indians/South Asians/ a large fraction of the immigrant community) are from the more privileged sections of society. I doubt if any of us have been forced to relocate on account of a "development project" carried out in the "national interest". And, living as we do, in the "developed" world (here again, one can see the victims of development if we only look around more carefully - for example, the Native Americans in Nevada who have been exposed to radioactive tailings from uranium mining or the people whose lands are being submerged by Hydro Quebec's dam in James Bay), it is but natural that many of us would unquestioningly accept the "logic" of development - that we need greater levels of consumption and that we need enormous industries to make these products. Consequently we are convinced that India needs large dams, or nuclear plants, or other sources of power. The film makes one question this whole logic, especially from the standpoint of the victims. And, makes it clear that the beneficiaries of such projects are completely different from (and indifferent to the plight of) the victims.

The second set of questions it raises is about the use of films, or art in general, as a medium of social transformation and empowerment. I raise these questions here in part as a response to some comments by Ramani Ramakrishnan on the use of art in the Desh Pardesh festival in an earlier issue (Kala, October-December 1997). In particular, he says "if the same creativity gushed forth for a proper union with the mainstream, just imagine

how beautiful and wonderful the result could be!" After seeing this film, one is led to question who or what the mainstream is and what it does.

The 'mainstream' is, of course, only too happy to have people believe in the notion that they have not been oppressed. Nowhere is this truer than in the arts, especially in mediums like cinema, which require a lot of resources. And, when mainstream cinema does show some of the victims, it is never with the intention of making people question the entire system as such - just that there are a few bad apples in the lot and once they are removed everything is fine and dandy. Such disempowering notions should be challenged and films like this show us how. It is up to each individual to see which side he or she would like to take in this struggle.

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### **Some questions raised by the film**

Raju Sivasankaran

The film make one think about the following questions about "progress" and "development". We may come up with different answers. But, the first step is to ask these questions.

1. Do we need development?
2. What kind of development are we talking about?
3. Development for who?
4. Can we sustain this development?
5. How is it going to affect people?
6. Are there viable alternatives?
7. How are we going to compensate assuming people get displaced?
8. Can we compensate?