

A Comment – Medha Patkar



1. The process of the World Commission on Dams was unprecedented in bringing together so many of those involved in debates and conflicts over large dams. Many peoples' movements and NGOs – the constituency that first proposed a comprehensive and independent review – actively participated. Our final Report has synthesised enormous amounts of information and diverse opinions and delivered many important findings and recommendations. I hope it will be a reference for all those concerned about large dams. While signing the Report because of its many positive aspects, I still feel I must put forth this opinion on some fundamental issues that are missing or not given the central place they deserve.
2. The problems of dams are a symptom of the larger failure of the unjust and destructive dominant development model. It is beyond the scope of our report or the brief of the Commission to resolve all the underlying problems of global development. But addressing these issues is essential in any attempt to reach an adequate analysis of the basic systemic changes needed to achieve equitable and sustainable development and to give a pointer towards challenging the forces that lead to the marginalisation of a majority through the imposition of unjust technologies like large dams.
3. The frequent failure of large dams to provide their claimed benefits and this poor performance needs to be recognised and accepted. There is no reason for optimism on the feasibility of improving the poor performance of dams and mitigating their impacts. A major question is the feasibility of just rehabilitation with land for land lost by agriculturists and alternative, appropriate sources of livelihood for other displaced people. In large scale displacement, the experience shows a clear failure. Within the value framework the Commission propagates – equity, sustainability, transparency, accountability, participatory decision-making, and efficiency – large dams have not helped attain, but rather hindered, “human development”.
4. An inclusive, transparent process of decision-making with equal status to all the stakeholders, equal place for local and national needs and plans, equal significance to social, environmental, technical and financial aspects of planning, would be a great advance, but does not go far enough. Even with rights recognised, risks assessed and stakeholders identified, existing iniquitous power relations would too easily allow developers to dominate and distort such processes. These developers include multilateral institutions like the World Bank that have pushed many large dams despite

non-compliance with their own policies. The State, controlled by powerful vested interests, may do the same. Understanding this takes us beyond a faith in negotiations to emphasize certain priorities and primacies.

Communities, especially those who live on and seek livelihood from their natural resource base, such as forest produce gatherers, farmers or fisherpeople, should have the first right to planning, development and management of those resources. Inequities within communities also need to be recognised and addressed. Social and environmental parameters must have a higher weightage than the technical and financial aspects in decisions concerning human development. It is necessary to stress the 'principle of subsidiarity', according to which development planning would be based on micro-catchments, working from ridge to river, and from origin to sea.

5. A full assessment of the options for meeting water and energy needs as the first part of project planning needs to be supported. But only creating a level playing field for options cannot suffice. We should instead give priority to more equitable, sustainable and effective options to satisfy basic human needs and livelihoods for all before supporting the additional luxuries of the few, unjustified in the face of the many who remain deprived.
6. The wider context of national and global political and economic trends obviously affect decisions in the water and power sector. These trends include the diminishing role of the State, the growing marginalisation of national laws and institutions, and the trampling of human rights due to the expanding role of private capital and free trade. While there may be a few welcome instances of progress towards enhanced human rights and equity, to say there is a global trend towards these goals would indeed be erroneous.

7. No undue legitimacy should be granted to corporations and international financing agencies. The sovereignty of both people and the nation-state must not be compromised for anything but the basic values and goals of humankind. It is necessary to give a serious critique of the privatisation of the water and power sectors and the resulting marginalisation of local people and corporate domination over natural resource-based communities.
8. The issues above are those raised by the peoples' movements whose role and perspectives should be given their due place. Not just with stories of eviction, repression and confrontation, but with their ideologies, strategies, and vision.
9. Over and above all this, I recognise and share the Commission's achievement of local to global consultation and, more so, a humane, well-intentioned, open and frank dialogue under an able leadership, which needs to be kept alive beyond the short life of this forum. To endorse the process and many of our findings and recommendations, I have signed the Report. To reject the underlying assumptions of a development model which has palpably failed and to caution against the massive gulf between a statement of good intent and a change in practice by entrenched vested interests I have asked for this note to be attached.

Whatever is missing or could not be addressed in the Report should form an agenda for further dialogue and research; but also for struggles for justice with people at the forefront, people more empowered by this report and otherwise to say NO to the perverted development vision, process and projects.

Medha Patkar

